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A CRACK COUNTY.

A CRACK COUNTY.

A Novel.

BY

MRS. EDWARD KENNARD,

Author of

"KILLED IN THE OPEN," "THE GIRL IN THE BROWN HABIT,"
"A REAL GOOD THING," ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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A CRACK COUNTY.

CHAPTER I.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

AND as Mr. Robert Jarrett continued to stare, he suddenly woke to the consciousness that the young lady, whoever she might be, possessed a very charming face. A face soft, and fresh, and fair; round in form, delicate in colouring, and beautified by a pair of clear gray eyes, fringed with long dark eye-lashes, whose straightforward and honest expression was attractive in the extreme.

She reddened imperceptibly at his somewhat prolonged scrutiny. Then finding he did not reply to her offer of assistance,

she broke into a little laugh, and said lightly :

“ Ah ! I see you think I am making a vain boast, in offering to help you out of your present dilemma, but the difficulty is by no means as great as it seems.”

“ It has puzzled me for some time,” said Bob, wiping his damp brow with a silk pocket-handkerchief. “ I never saw such a gate in my life.”

She laughed again, merrily like a little child, and clapped her hands together.

“ Ah ! you are not the first gentleman who has been similarly baffled. Indeed, I often tell Farmer Budge quite seriously that he ought to put up a notice, giving full directions as to how his gates open, but he declares this is precisely what he does not want. Now, look here and I will show you the secret. There ! do you see ? ” and stooping down from the saddle, she pressed a small iron knob, imbedded in the

wood at the very end of the latch, and which Bob in his impatience had entirely overlooked.

The gate immediately flew open.

“It is quite simple once you know the way,” she said with a smile of amusement.

“Like a good many other things,” he remarked, as he led The Swell on to the road.

“These latches were exhibited at the last Agricultural Show, I believe,” she went on, talking naturally and easily. “Farmer Budge has taken out a patent and claims to be the inventor. He is very proud of them, but all the hunting gentlemen are loud in their condemnation.”

“I don’t wonder. They are diabolical things, and I really can’t think what would have become of me if you had not just happened to appear when you did.”

“And yet you looked a little dis-

appointed, at least judging from the expression of your face," she said archly.

Bob blushed. He had no idea that his countenance had betrayed him, or that she would prove so discerning.

"How sharp you are. Well, I will not deny the truth. I *was* a little disappointed, because I thought it had come to be a regular case of brute force, which would require a couple of men's strength."

"Whereas female cunning has answered the purpose as well," she retorted gaily.

"It has answered the purpose so far, that I cannot help feeling I owe you an immense debt of gratitude."

And as he spoke, he caught hold of The Swell's mane, hoisted himself into the saddle, and moved on a pace or two.

His companion, whose way was apparently identical, instead of wishing him good-bye, continued to ride by his side. She was not very smartly dressed, not

nearly as smartly as Lady De Fochsey. Her plain black habit showed symptoms of wear. It had a large leather patch over the knee, and the seams were decidedly threadbare; but for all that, Bob thought there was no comparison between the two women. With the one, every tone, every action, was evidently studied; with the other, a freedom from all self-consciousness gave her an undefinable charm, which he felt before he had been two minutes in her presence.

“Oh!” she exclaimed; “how dreadfully lame your poor horse is. What is the matter with him?”

“I don’t know,” answered Bob. “But I can’t get him along at all.”

“You shouldn’t try to,” she said reproachfully, as he endeavoured to increase the speed. “If you do, you deserve to be taken up for cruelty to animals.”

“It would not matter if it were not

so infernally cold," he rejoined with a shiver.

She looked up at him with an air of true feminine pity, which sank deep into the foolish fellow's heart. All through the day that particular organ had been hardening and hardening, until at last it felt like a stone. One single glance from a pretty, fresh-faced young woman made a curious difference in his sensations. It was so sweet to find that *somebody* sympathised in his misfortunes, instead of turning them into ridicule. A lump came into his throat, as her soft, compassionate eyes rested upon him.

"Did you meet with an accident?" she asked commiseratingly.

It was as if he could not tell her an untruth, or even conceal his shortcomings.

"I tumbled off into a brook. My horse stopped short, and I flew over his head.

No doubt I ought not to have quitted the pigskin, but I did."

He spoke with a kind of defiant doggedness, which betrayed a secret fear that she might laugh at him. Apparently nothing was further from her intentions. She had laughed merrily enough a few moments ago. He had only thought to himself how pure and childlike her mirth sounded. But now her little flower-like face, with its large eyes and rose-bud mouth, looked very grave and sedate.

"Everybody comes off when they ought not to," she said consolingly. "We think nothing of such small casualties down here. Why! the very best rider in all the Hunt—a poor man who was killed only the other day, flew off last season before the whole field, without any apparent reason. But tell me, have you far to go? Because if so, we could change saddles, and I might lend you my dear old

Mouse to ride home upon. You would get there sooner."

Bob was quite affected by the kindness of this proposal, coming as it did from a complete stranger.

"And you—what would you do?" he said after a slight pause.

"I? Oh! I should put your horse into our stable, and let the poor thing remain there till you send for him. How much further have you to go?" returning to her point.

"I really haven't an idea. I'm a stranger, and have never hunted here before to-day."

"Will you tell me, then, for what place you are bound? I know most of the distances pretty accurately, having lived in this part of the world nearly all my life."

"I am bound for Straightem Court," said Bob in reply.

She gave a little start.

"Then you are Mr. Jarrett! I thought as much."

"Did you? How was that?" he asked with awakening curiosity.

"Because I know the greater number of the regular *habitués* of our hunt, at all events by sight."

"Don't you think," said Bob, "that since I have told you my name, you might as well tell me yours; it's always more comfortable to know who people are."

"If it would add to your *comfort* in any way, Mr. Jarrett," she replied jestingly, "I have great pleasure in informing you that my name is Dot." And two mischievous dimples appeared in either cheek.

"Dot!" he repeated, lingering unconsciously on the word. "What is Dot short for?"

"Dorothea. Being a rather small person, I was presented with a very grand name.

But as everybody seems to find it rather a mouthful, it has been reduced to Dot."

"Dot what? I rather like Dot," and Bob stole a glance at her; "but I suppose you have a surname like all the rest of the world."

"Oh! yes, Lankester. But let me introduce myself formally. Miss Dorothea Lankester, only daughter of Doctor Hugh Lankester, who enjoys the privilege and distinction of dispensing nostrums to the good people in your village. When you require medical aid, Mr. Jarrett, please think of us." And she turned a pair of laughing gray eyes full upon him."

"Would you come to nurse me?" he asked, chiming in with her mood.

"I should have to. No choice would be given me in the matter. So mind and don't fall ill. I always say that I would rather attend to a dozen women than one man."

“ Why ? I should have thought it would have been the other way about.”

“ Because the men have not got a bit of pluck, and give in at once. They always make up their minds that they are going to die, even if they only cut their finger, whereas women are so used to discomfort and physical pain, that they bear even the most dreadful sufferings with stoicism.”

“ I shouldn’t mind putting up with a good deal of discomfort to be nursed by you,” said Bob, still harping on the same idea, and getting bolder as he began to feel more at ease.

“ Oh ! no, you wouldn’t.” And she pursed up her little face till it wore a comically severe expression. “ I’m an awfully strict nurse and keep my patients in thorough order.”

“ I hope we shall see a great deal of each other,” he said, visions of neighbourly visits, pleasant dinners, and delight-

ful country rides with Miss Dot flashing across his mind's eye. "It will be so nice for us to be good friends."

"Very," she replied with frank unconsciousness. "The worst of it is, father is generally so dreadfully busy, he hardly ever has a moment to himself. He was only saying to-day, that really we ought to call upon you."

"Who are we?" asked Bob, artfully endeavouring to find out of how many members the family of Miss Lankester consisted.

"Mother and me. Father very seldom is able to come with us when we leave his paste-boards."

"Don't pay me a formal visit," he said eagerly. "I do so hate them. And—and—what day may I expect you?" He was making great strides towards intimacy. Somehow he felt as if he had known her all his life.

“ I really can’t say exactly, Mr. Jarrett.” she replied, smiling at his *empressement*.

“ Come any non-hunting day. Tuesday, for instance. That’s to-morrow, isn’t it ? ”

“ Very well, I’ll ask mother.”

“ Wait a bit, though. Why not come to dinner ? ” urged hospitable Bob. “ It would be ever so much jollier.” Then, with a sudden burst of confidence, inspired by Miss Dot’s sympathetic manner, he added plaintively : “ I can’t tell you how lonely I’ve been all this time. It will be a perfect godsend to me to have somebody to talk to.”

“ Don’t you find everybody remarkably talkative out hunting ? ” asked Dot, mischievously.

“ No, very much the reverse. They seem a rum lot of fellows, at least according to my way of thinking. I never met a duller, solemn set in my life.”

Dot’s clear laugh rang out. It did him

good to hear it. There was something so genuine and so hearty about her laughter.

“Ah!” she exclaimed, “I perceive that either directly or indirectly you have been making the acquaintance of some of our great people.”

“Yes,” he said, savagely, “they are *very* great, at all events in their own estimation. As for me, I confess I cannot see wherein lies their superiority over the rest of mankind. They are intolerably rude and entirely wanting in good manners.”

Then he checked himself suddenly, feeling that he might possibly be committing an indiscretion, and that it was scarcely wise to abuse folk with whom Miss Lankester was probably well acquainted. For all he knew, they were perhaps personal friends of hers.

“Forgive me,” he said, turning crimson. “I was forgetting that I might be hurting your feelings.”

She smiled brightly, and when she smiled Bob could not account for the attraction her face possessed. With the exception of the eyes, it owned no really striking feature, and yet he admired and liked her more than any girl he had ever seen. His own sisters were good-looking, but there was a subtle refinement about Miss Lankester which he felt was wanting in their case. Nevertheless, it was hard to define the difference. As for Lady de Fochsey, she seemed positively vulgar in comparison.

“Pray don’t have any fear of hurting my feelings,” said Dot, with just a touch of satire audible in her clear young voice. “*We* are only small fry; and such exalted personages as the Mutual Adorationites do not even condescend to know us. We regard their many virtues from a distance——”

“The greater the better,” he interrupted.

“But,” she went on, more seriously,

"you must not condemn all Englishmen from the specimens you may have seen to-day. There are some"—and a tender look illuminated all her face—"who don't live exclusively for their personal pleasure and consider it the chief and foremost object of existence—men whose ideal is not mere amusement, but something worthier and nobler, and who see that work and work alone can bring out the grit and substance of a man's character."

Bob looked at his companion with growing interest. She spoke enthusiastically, and her views evidently coincided with his own. Young as he was, he had arrived at a philosophy of life which in substance was much the same.

"You are right, no doubt," he said. "And those are the men I thought and hoped I should meet over here. Perhaps I expected too much." And he gave a sigh of disappointment.

“I don’t think so. You forget that those who represent the hunting-field mostly belong to the rich and consequently idle class: a class without professions, and which has no incentive to bring its higher faculties into play.”

“They look down upon a fellow,” said Bob bitterly, “because his clothes are different from their own, because he has not been born in England, and for a hundred and one different reasons, equally trifling. I am sharp enough to know what they think of me. They think me an ‘outsider,’ and therefore cut me dead. It’s not pleasant being cut, Miss Lankester,” he concluded pathetically. “One can’t help feeling it, especially when, as in my case, you have always been brought up to look upon these men as brothers, and people of your own kith and kin.”

“Never mind,” said Dot, soothingly. “Things may very likely improve after a

bit, and in any case, you must not form your opinions too hastily. I only wish you knew a man——”

But she stopped short, and did not finish the sentence. A bright blush rose to her face, and Bob wondered inwardly what had caused it, whether some chance word of his had touched any secret chord.

“Good-bye, Mr. Jarrett,” she said, after a somewhat prolonged pause, holding out her hand as she spoke. “Here we are in the village. You cannot possibly mistake your way now, since if you go straight on for another hundred yards you will see the gates of Straightem Court. I turn down here,” pointing to a side road that branched off at right angles from the main one.

“Good-bye,” said Bob, reluctantly, detaining her little gloved hand decidedly longer than strict politeness demanded. “I’m tremendously obliged to you.”

“What for?” she asked, with the innocence of a child.

“Oh! for ever so much. I felt most awfully down in the mouth when you joined me at that beastly gate, regularly out of sorts all round, but thanks to your company, I am pounds better already.”

“I am very glad to hear it, Mr. Jarrett. Please keep up your spirits, and don’t forget that we English, as a race, are not so bad as you seem to imagine.”

“I except the fair sex,” he replied gallantly. “I think that English women—especially English girls, are perfectly delightful.”

“Oh! so you have made their acquaintance already, have you?”

“Yes,” he answered, raising his hat with the courtesy of an Elizabethan knight. “I have met *you*, Miss Lankester. That is quite enough for me.”

Her smooth, pink cheek turned just a

shade pinker, but otherwise she took but little heed of the implied compliment. It did not ruffle her calm serenity.

Dot Lankester was not a flirt. Never did there a girl exist less coquettishly inclined. The frank simplicity of her nature prevented her from seeing in every man a possible lover; besides, she was content to remain as she was. In her youth and innocence she believed firmly in platonic friendships. She was touched, too, by Bob's confession of loneliness. She knew the big house, with its cold, formal rooms, and retinue of servants—knew it and shuddered at it. Some are born for grandeur, some are not. Dot's idea of happiness was a small abode, little bigger than a cottage, and two softly-treading maids to wait upon her. She did not covet wealth or the pomp of this world.

And so, she could fancy how dull and how home-sick the young man must feel,

separated from all his relations, living alone in that great gray old place.

It was not in her power to do much for him, but what little she could, she would.

“Before you go, do promise faithfully to come on Tuesday,” pleaded Bob, still holding her hand in his. “Surely you need not treat me like a stranger or stand on ceremony.”

She withdrew it gently, and with a little air of quiet dignity, which told him as well as actual words that he must not attempt to take any liberties. If they were to be friends, the limits of their friendship must not be overstrained, especially on so short an acquaintance.

“Thank you. I will tell my father and mother of your kind invitation, and an answer shall be sent this evening. Will that do?” shortening Mouse’s reins.

“It will have to do,” he said, not feeling

wholly satisfied, yet afraid to urge the matter further.

“Good-bye, then,” she said again, this time moving away at a fairly brisk trot.

“Good-bye.” And cold and wet as Bob was, he reined in The Swell until Miss Lankester’s girlish form had completely disappeared from vision.

Coming to him as she had done, in the midst of his distress—the only person during all that day who had treated him kindly and with commiseration—he felt ready to fall down and worship at her feet. His imagination magnified a hundredfold the service she had performed.

So deeply does a little sympathy sink into the heart of those whose sensibilities have been outraged and feelings wounded.

At such times a few kind words will restore a man’s self respect and make him the friend for life of the woman who utters them.

Only such words are dangerous, from the very fact that he is apt to think too much of them and to take them for more than they are worth.

In Bob's case, he immediately jumped at the conclusion, that as a specimen of a fair, frank English girl, utterly devoid of conceit or affectation, there were not many who could compare with Miss Dorothea Lankester.

He had arrived at the age of four-and-twenty, and, strange to say, had never been seriously in love. The Australian maidens had failed to captivate his fancy, though perhaps the reason might have partly been that until now he was not in a position to marry. Be this as it may, those five minutes spent in Miss Dot's society, her gray eyes, and fresh young face, put some very strange and novel ideas into his head.

He himself was startled by their presence

and by the suddenness with which they took form and shape. Only yesterday he would have been the very readiest to laugh at such a thing as love at first sight. To-day he was by no means so sure that it was as idiotic and absurd as he had hitherto maintained.



CHAPTER II.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS.

HAD our friend Bob not had the good fortune to encounter Dot Lankester when he did, he would most assuredly have sunk in the lowest depths of despair on proceeding to review the results of the day, to which he had looked forward with such a large amount of youthful enthusiasm. Few pleasures equal the anticipation that they excite. When they do they are too short-lived to produce any substantial satisfaction. Only a few brief moments, snatched from the dreary waste of life, which we fain would lengthen if we could, but whose very brightness makes the dull daily path seem darker in comparison.

Every human being has an insatiate—perhaps a selfish—desire for happiness. It is all very well to philosophize, to preach wisdom, moderation and content. When we are first put into the world, and are young and sanguine, we all of us expect something from it. We look upon it as a kind of fairy godmother, who will certainly grant our wishes and fulfil our desires. It takes a good many years to learn the truth, and the learning is seldom pleasant. Some never learn it. The lesson is too hard. They cannot understand why, instead of showering good gifts upon their children, the world only robs them of their small possessions, and takes away with hard covetous hand, faith, hope and illusion. What then is left? Little save endurance. A growing apathy which renders the buffets of Fate a trifle less hard to bear, and a conviction of the pettiness of human strivings, when opposed to the

stern, resistless pressure of nature. A sense of defeat still hung over Bob. He was as sore morally as if he had been thoroughly thrashed for an uncommitted offence. Nevertheless the remembrance of Dot's innocent face, when she had looked up into his own and offered to lend him her cob, exercised a wonderfully soothing effect upon his over-wrought nervous system.

It contrived to render bearable what otherwise would have seemed wholly unbearable. For his heart was full of wrath when he reflected upon the reception accorded him by the master of the Morbey Anstead hounds and his friend General Prosieboy. It was useless trying to persuade himself that he did not care. He *did* care, and moreover very deeply ; although he declared inwardly that he was every bit as good as these men who affected to despise him. But it was not enough for

him to know the fact, he wanted them to acknowledge it also. Besides, was he not their neighbour, and the owner of lands broad and goodly? Surely these latter entitled him to some consideration.

In short, Bob was very angry, almost as angry as he had been when he had caught one of his cowboys red-handed in the act of torturing some cattle. From that day until this no such volcano had raged within his breast. He hardly realized what tumultuous passions he possessed. But if he was quick-tempered, he was not vindictive.

By the time he had eaten a good dinner, comforted the inner man by flesh, and fowl, and wine, his anger gradually cooled. He was thoroughly warm again now, having as soon as the evening meal came to an end taken up his quarters in the smallest and cosiest sitting-room in the house, and ensconced himself in a luxurious arm-

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

chair before a blazing fire, whose blue and yellow flames shot merrily up the chimney licking its sooty sides with greedy avidity.

A long day's hunting in the open air, especially when accompanied by an increase of the physical temperature, gives birth to a gentle lassitude, which promotes dreams, and renders a state of do nothing not only permissible but enjoyable.

A man feels at such seasons that he has earned a right to repose, and nine times out of ten gives himself up to slumber, or, if not to slumber, to quiet meditation which encroaches on the borderland of sleep. Bob began by going over all his experiences since the morning. He summed up the pleasures and the pains with almost morbid precision, trying hard not to detract from the former, or to exaggerate the latter. But do what he would the pains preponderated until, down

the road of thought, his brain travelled as far as Miss Dot.

There he came to a complete halt, almost as if he did not care to pursue his retrospections further, but was quite content to dwell upon the image conjured up by her frank face, bright eyes and soft fresh tints.

And all of a sudden it occurred to him, like a genuine flash of inspiration, that the big, desolate house, with its empty rooms, and uninhabited appearance, might wear a very different and more home-like aspect if presided over by a clear-headed, sweet-voiced mistress. What was wanting at Straightem Court was a gracious, feminine influence. He had felt it from the first moment he set foot inside the hall, but now there could be no doubt whatever about the matter. A man alone could not possibly keep authority in the household, or make the intricate wheels of domestic

life run smoothly. How was *he* to order dinner, and add up the butcher's book, and keep peace between the maid-servants? There was only one answer to such a question, and that answer was—impossible. He could look after cattle and sheep, attend to the farm and stables, but as to ordering in legs of mutton and sirloins of beef—why he simply could not do it. He revolted at the mere thought of entering into such petty details. As for women, it was the business of their lives. Man-like it never struck him that the same “petty details” which worried him while he scorned them have rendered many a woman miserable, and laid a daily burden on her shoulders under the weight of which she often groans.

But there is no escape for her. One of the chief uses of a wife is to lay the blame of everything that happens at her door. And for this reason, of all luxuries she is the

greatest. It is so easy and so nice to be able to say in a loud, chiding voice, "My dear, it is your fault. I told you to do it," or, "Why the dickens have you made such a regular mull of things all round?"

The responsibility is shifted, very conveniently, and the poor "luxury" can only mumble feeble excuses and in her turn try to implicate Mary Anne or Susan Jane.

Bob had had about ten days' house-keeping, and already he wished to resign the situation. He told himself that with a nice little wife sitting opposite, even English dinners might prove enjoyable. His imagination could not conceive of Mrs. Robert P. Jarrett's fascinations being put to a greater test, but he believed Dot would emerge from the ordeal triumphant. True, he was very young to think of marrying; indeed, up till now, he had always been a staunch advocate of the theory that men should have their fling—and a good one

too — before settling down to jog-trot matrimony.

But it is astonishing how a pretty face and good eyes will revolutionize the most strong-minded male's theories, crumbling them to the very dust with lightning-like rapidity. They can alter a man's whole train of reasoning in a few seconds, and more wonderful still, make him advance an entirely new line of argument. No deserter in action could possibly change front with greater speed or make more plausible excuses for his conduct.

Bob, who hitherto had professed to be a confirmed bachelor, felt suddenly convinced that the proper thing to do was to marry a girl directly you saw one who you thought would suit you. Only fools shilly-shallied under such circumstances.

The funny thing was how, after five short minutes' conversation with Dot, he should have arrived at so momentous a

conclusion as to believe that he had certainly discovered his affinity, and could not possibly be enchain'd by any other.

How men can flatter themselves they know anything of a woman's real character in such a brief space of time is marvellous, to say the least of it. And yet that they do so imagine is seen every day of one's life, and proved by the ill-assorted and incongruous couples so frequently met with. A face endowed by nature with certain good points, a pink and white complexion and a nice expression, is quite sufficient to convince the lords of creation that they know the proprietor perfectly well. Just think of it! *I know WOMAN!* that masterpiece of caprice, of fitful moods and sudden impulses; that coy, uncertain, changeable creature who does not even pretend to know herself, and who admits the variability of her character.

Oh ! men, beware of your passions.

They render you blind as the veriest mole that ever burrowed earth. For fully an hour Bob sat there musing rapturously on Miss Dot's perfections. Then by degrees a sleepy inclination stole over him. At last he made a vigorous effort, and rising from the arm-chair, laid aside his pipe and went towards the writing table. It was some time since he had written to his mother, and she would be getting anxious if she did not hear from him. Therefore he sat down and inscribed the following letter :

“ DEAREST MOTHER,

“ I sent you a hurried account of my uncle’s sudden death and the altered circumstances in which it left me. Even now I can scarcely realize all that has happened, or appreciate what I suppose most people would call my good fortune. I need not say that I wish you and my brothers and sisters to share in it. It

is unnecessary attempting to describe Straightem Court to yon, because of course you know it well. I will only mention that in size and grandeur it far exceeds my expectations. Indeed, I often think I should like the place better if it were not quite so big. Ten days have elapsed since my arrival, and I begin to doubt if I shall ever settle down. Everything seems so new and so strange—forgive me if I add so dull and so formal. There is a want of freedom here, a stiffness and a conventionality which produce a stifling effect upon me. People all seem to jog on in one little narrow groove, from which they either cannot or will not emancipate themselves. The consequence is there is very little real independence, such as we see at home ; the ladies and gentlemen are very much to be pitied in my opinion ; as far as I have had an opportunity of judging, they are mere slaves to their establishments,

their institutions and their bodily comforts. They are like a flock of sheep ; if one treads a particular path they all follow, however inconvenient and ridiculous it may be. Appearances are evidently a great deal studied in this country ; the verdict of the world carries much weight, yet in curious contradiction to this fact, the upper classes seem going to the dogs altogether. From what I gather, their morality is at a very low ebb. Even dukes and duchesses figure in the Divorce Court. There is a famous case going on now, some of the details of which would simply horrify you. The men here have no veneration for women ; it is dreadful the way they speak of them, and yet I am informed that in fashionable society the women deserve all they get. But whether they do, or whether they don't, it seems to me a mean, unmanly sort of thing to go about backbiting the poor creatures. You will think I have turned

very censorious, so now for a change of subject. I went out hunting to-day for the first time ; the sport is a grand one ; I don't believe there is another that can compare with it, and yet it seems odd too, wherein the pleasure consists of chasing a little red animal, and running the risk of breaking your bones, if not your neck, in the pursuit. But there are some things that don't bear analyzing and, thank goodness ! fox-hunting is one of them. May it never be picked to pieces by a herd of dissecting critics, for when it ceases to exist England's day will be done, and she can take a back seat among the nations ; so much for the glorious chase. You see what an enthusiast it has made of me. But the field ! the people ! those genial, jovial squires whose acquaintance I so longed to make ; words cannot describe the insolence of their manners towards an unoffending stranger. To tell you how they treated

your first-born, mother dear, would only pain you. Therefore I pass over my reception in silence. Suffice it that all my illusions are gone, I fear me, never to return. The question is, whether I shall be able to live amongst these people. And this brings me to an important point. How strange it seems having to communicate one's plans by letter. At present it is horribly cold over here, and later on the climate becomes, if possible, worse. Now what I would propose is this. In the spring I must certainly return to Australia, if only to wind up affairs and hand over the farm to Dick. Instead, therefore, of you and the girls joining me at once, leaving warmth and sunshine and coming to frost and fogs, I am of opinion that it would be far wiser to defer your journey, until the winter is over. Then we might all travel back together. What do you say to this idea? To tell the honest truth, I

feel as if my life here were an experiment. I may or I may not settle to it. In two or three months' time I should be in a better position to judge whether you and the girls are likely to be as happy at Straightem Court as at home. We have been colonists so long that frequently I have misgivings as to our ever succeeding in converting ourselves into fine gentlemen and ladies of the orthodox type. One needs to be brought up to it. To break up our dear old home before we are perfectly certain the new one will suit us, appears to me an imprudent act. For myself, it is quite on the cards that you may see me, at any time, return unexpectedly. I feel awfully homesick already, and miss you all most dreadfully. I never thought it would be possible to get so dead tired of one's own society. Nobody has condescended to call upon me so far, except a couple of parsons, who both immediately begged for subscrip-

tions to various charities. The County people seem a very stuck-up lot. I don't wonder you preferred my father, and showed your good sense by running away from them. And now, dear mother, I am very tired and very sleepy, and must leave off. Give my love to Belle and Tottie, and the little ones, and tell Dick from me that I trust to him to look after you well in my absence.

“ Ever your affectionate son,

“ ROBERT P. JARRETT.”

Not a word of Miss Lankester. Something made Bob shy of mentioning her name, even to those he confided in most.

And yet he felt as guilty as if he were concealing a secret of vital importance. He re-read his letter, and made some trifling corrections. But when he came to the end a sudden impulse urged him to add :

“I forgot to tell you that I am giving my first dinner-party to-morrow night. It is almost absurd to call it by such a name, since the company consist only of a Doctor and Mrs. Lankester and their daughter. They live in the village, and are my nearest neighbours.”

Bob perused this postscript with considerable self-approbation. It satisfied his conscience and yet revealed nothing. He felt proud of having handled such a delicate matter with so much skill, for if, at any future time, there should be anything to tell, then he flattered himself that he had paved the way for telling it. At least the name of Lankester would not burst like a bombshell upon the family circle.

As he sealed up his letter Charles brought in a note on a silver salver.

It was from Dot.

The contents were brief enough.

“ DEAR MR. JARRETT,

“ My father and mother wish me to thank you for your kind invitation, and to say that we shall be very pleased to dine with you to-morrow at half-past seven.

“ Hoping you feel none the worse for having got so wet, believe me,

“ Yours sincerely,

“ DOROTHEA LANKESTER.”

Only a formal note of acceptance, worded in polite but distant language, and yet Bob gazed at it with rapturous admiration.

What a pretty handwriting she wrote! so clean, and neat, and thoroughly feminine. He liked the way she crossed her t's and dotted her i's; there was a deal of character about them. And then he took to speculating how the signature would look if it were signed Dorothea Jarrett instead of Dorothea Lankester.

Lankester was a fine, high-sounding name. The sort of name just suited for the heroine of a novel, but for all that there was something very pleasing about Jarrett.

D. for Dorothea, and J. for Jarrett went well together—very well, he considered.

So, with his head stuffed full of strange new thoughts, this hitherto sensible young man went to bed, and—dreamt of Miss Dot?

Not he.

He was far too tired and stiff to indulge in any trance-like visions.

The dun cob, the gray eyes, the frank, innocent face, all faded from his mind as if they had been a mirage, and settling down between the sheets he slept like a top.

CHAPTER III.

GETTING UP A FLIRTATION.

PUNCTUALLY at half-past seven next morning Bob was roused from his dreamless slumbers by Charles, who, after tapping at the door and receiving no response, entered the room majestically, and began pulling up the blinds with noisy clumsiness.

“Hulloa! Charles, is that you? What’s the time?” yawned Bob.

“It has just gone half-past seven, sir.”

“By Jove! You don’t say so.”

And before he was thoroughly awake Bob jumped out of bed, goaded by the knowledge that he had a journey to take. After his experiences of the previous day the indifference to personal appearance which he had hitherto displayed vanished

miraculously. He was prepared to admit that there might be something in clothes after all. Those soft snowy leathers and bright scarlet coats undoubtedly did set a man off. Until he had actually seen them with his own eyes he could not have realized how great an effect they produced. In fact, all Bob's ideas on the subject of adornment had undergone a complete transformation. He was now filled with a consuming desire to appear out hunting dressed precisely as his neighbours were dressed.

Consequently he had decided to run up to town, and lose no time in ordering a suitable stock of boots and breeches. Although he had said as little as possible about the discomforts caused by his attire, and the breaking of those elastic straps, he had been unable to prevent Charles from acquiring a tolerably accurate knowledge of the situation ; and Charles had strongly

advised and approved of his going to London and purchasing a proper hunting kit without any delay.

“I told you afore you went ‘unting ’ow it would be, sir,” he said with a malicious chuckle. Consequently Bob had studied the Bradshaw, and discovered that if he rose tolerably early he could reach the metropolis a little after eleven o’clock and return in time for dinner.

So he dressed hurriedly, ate an excellent breakfast, and by half-past eight was bowling along to the station in a light, two-wheeled cart, drawn by a hog-maned, fast-trotting pony.

The morning was fresh and bright.

The big, green fields on either side of the hedgerows were steeped in pale, yellow sunshine, not fierce and glaring as in the summer-time, but cool, light, clear, and refreshing to the eye. Every now and again a swift, dark cloud shadow would

come coursing along their emerald surface, for a few minutes converting all the vivid tints into a sombre grey. But as it raced ahead it was beautiful to behold the glory of leaf and blade bursting out afresh, appearing yet brighter and greener for their temporary obliteration.

Big, black, limpid-eyed oxen stood close under the hedges, rubbing their broad, scurfy foreheads against the knotted twigs, and slowly but steadily boring apertures in the thick fences with their strong, polished horns.

Gay autumnal hues adorned the trees ; red, brown and yellow combined to render their last span of life beautiful. Their tall, irregular tops towered up towards the faint blue sky, and in places where the leaves had already fallen, revealed the delicate network of their construction. As for the birds, they were twittering and chirping, flitting and alighting, almost as

if the time of year had been March instead of November, forgetting that the winter was approaching with its cruel frosts, cold snows, and pitiless winds. They recked not of the future, wee, happy, thoughtless things! The present with its gladsome sunshine was all they cared about, believing that this one bright day would last for ever.

As Bob drove along, the cool, bracing air bringing a healthy glow to his cheeks, he thought that never had he been out on such a fair morning. What struck him most was the astonishing greenness of everything. Here was no sign of drought or barrenness, but everywhere the same verdant, fertile stretches of undulating pastures meeting the sky-line and extending in all directions, far as the eye could reach. It was a perfect harmony of blue and green, with a dash of yellow thrown in to give light to the whole.

Bob arrived at the station in good time, took his ticket, purchased a morning paper, and ensconced himself in a smoking-carriage.

He waited thus some minutes, when beginning to wonder why the train did not start he put his head out of the window. Then for the first time he became aware of a commotion on the platform, which appeared to be caused by a dapper little female figure, enveloped in a thick Scotch ulster, that presently came tripping along as fast as it could move for a pair of brand new, and evidently extremely tight, hunting boots.

“I’m late, dreadfully late,” cried an excited feminine voice, speaking in high, agitated tones. “There was a mistake about the horse-box. Put me in anywhere; I’m not at all particular.”

Bob had already filled and lit a favourite cherry-wood pipe. The next moment, to

his no small discomfiture, he found the owner of the voice securely locked into his compartment by a stalwart, red-bearded guard.

“What an idiot that boy of mine is, to be sure!” exclaimed the fair one crossly, apparently too much flustered to notice that she was not alone, and evidently venting her wrath by giving utterance to it aloud. “I declare if he didn’t go and take a ticket for Masterton, when I told him as distinctly as possible overnight that I intended hunting with the Gallopers to-day instead of with the Seldom Kill hounds. I really think I shall have to give him warning. His stupidity is too great for anything.”

So saying, she stood up and smoothed her ruffled plumes, buttoned up her ulster, and generally adjusted her toilette, the finishing touches of which had clearly been performed in a hurry. The train whistled,

and moved slowly out of the station. She was jerked back into her seat, and Bob half rose to go to her assistance.

The recognition was instantaneous.

“Lady De Fochsey!” he exclaimed.

“Mr. Jarrett!” she ejaculated on her side, in well-pleased accents, for Bob’s fresh, good-looking face had already made an impression upon her ladyship out hunting, and she was determined to get up a flirtation, in the hopes that that long deferred passion might possibly spring into life. “I do hope you will forgive my forcing my company upon you in this exceedingly unceremonious fashion, but the truth is, I was so abominably late that I really had not time to notice whether the guard put me into a smoking-carriage or not.”

(As a matter of fact, she invariably chose one by preference, having a rooted dislike to the society of her own sex, but this

idiosyncrasy she did not deem fit to mention.)

“Pray don’t apologize,” said Bob politely, knocking the tobacco out of his pipe with an alacrity more feigned than real.

“Oh! Mr. Jarrett, why did you do that?”

“I thought you might object to smoke. Nine ladies out of ten do.”

“I don’t. Not in the least. I assure you I’m quite accustomed to it. Besides”—casting a languishing glance at him from under her goldenish eyelashes—“you need not mind me, surely.”

“I can’t help minding you,” he responded audaciously, having already decided that if he indulged in a few flowers of speech, there was not much fear of his meeting with a rebuff. “You are far too charming to be ignored, wherever you may be.”

She smiled encouragingly. This young man promised uncommonly well; better even than she had suspected. She had feared he might prove shy, but now she altered her opinion. If there was one thing she loved in this world, it was a good, honest, outspoken admission of her charms. If only her admirers would keep on telling her that she was pretty, fascinating, divine, she could forgive them almost any impertinence. She was not very strait-laced, but flattery she must have.

“When are you coming to see me?” she inquired coquettishly, in answer to Bob’s remark.

“When are you going to ask me?” he rejoined, giving up any attempt at reading the newspaper, and seating himself directly opposite to her.

“I have asked you already, Mr. Jarrett.”

“Only in a very general way. I don’t

prefer your specifying a day, if you have no objection."

"Dear me!" she exclaimed, "how punctilious we are, to be sure! Do you always stand on so much ceremony? One is not accustomed to it now-a-days."

"Yes," answered Bob gravely, "whenever there is a pretty woman in the case, I would rather have five minutes' chat with her alone than three hours in the presence of a dozen other men. The fact of the matter is, I'm covetous, and prefer not sharing my bone."

Lady De Fochsey was delighted. She thoroughly enjoyed this style of conversation, and moreover possessed the happy faculty of believing that where she herself was concerned men meant all they said, and were perfectly sincere in their professions of admiration.

"Oh, you flatterer!" she said, shaking her blonde head playfully at him, "you are

trying to put me off with compliments, instead of settling a day for your visit. I call that too bad."

"Such an idea never entered my head," protested Bob. "When is your ladyship at home?"

"I'm always at home to my particular friends."

"And may I venture to think myself included in their number?"

"Now, Mr. Jarrett, you want to know too much. That's hardly a fair question."

"Perhaps not," he admitted. "I'll ask you another one instead. Tell me, is not Sunday generally supposed to be a good day for calling, or do your devotions prevent you from receiving gentlemen on that afternoon?"

"Oh! dear no, not at all."

"Ah! I'm glad to hear it. I was afraid you might have some religious scruples on

the subject.” He spoke with just a touch of sarcasm, which she detected and resented.

“ I do not know why you should have imagined anything half so foolish,” she rejoined tartly. “ And as for my religious scruples, I flatter myself that I possess neither more nor less than my neighbours. Perhaps you mayn’t believe me, but I always make a point of going to church every Sunday morning, if only for the sake of the example.”

“ One attendance franks you for the rest of the day, I presume ? ” said Bob, with a laugh.

She recovered her good humour. It was a relief to find he was not disagreeably strict.

“ Well, yes, it does, I confess.”

“ Ah ! I thought so.”

“ For my part,” she said decidedly, “ I can’t see the least harm in entertaining a

few amusing people on a Sabbath afternoon."

"Neither can I," he acquiesced, quite approving of the sentiment.

"In that case, Mr. Jarrett, I shall expect you on Sunday without fail."

"How long an audience do you grant your admirers at a time, Lady de Fochsey? Ten minutes, quarter of an hour?"

She laughed her little, thin, artificial laugh.

"You shall have a whole hour if you are good, and promise to come early."

"That I certainly will. The instant I've gobbled my lunch I shall set out."

"Do. I live quite close to Straightem Court, Mr. Jarrett. Only about two miles; it's nothing of a walk, and I hope you will come over often."

"Thanks, you are very kind. And I can assure you that were the walk ten times as long I should think nothing of the distance

with such a reward awaiting me at the end of it."

She put out her foot, and glanced coyly down at it. It was a very pretty one, and she was quite aware of the fact, and saw no reason why other people should not become acquainted with it too. A clever woman always makes the most of her good points, and hides the bad ones. Lady De Fochsey was not a bit ashamed of her foot, no—nor of her uncle either. Thank goodness ! they were both symmetrical and patrician, though her people were nobodies, and she herself was only in the position of a poorly paid companion, when Sir Jonathan had been smitten by her charms.

"Really, Mr. Jarrett," she said, in honied tones, "you will quite turn my head if you will insist on paying me so many compliments."

It was a regular invitation to repeat the offence. At all events, Bob, who was no

fool, construed her ladyship's accusation as such, and construed it aright.

"I don't think it altogether fair to lay the whole blame at my door," he responded, feeling more and more amused by her transparent coquettishness, and evident desire to egg him on.

"Why not?" she inquired with a simper.

"For the very simple reason that if that extremely pretty little head of yours were capable of being turned in such a manner, the mischief must have been done long since. I can only be one of many sinners."

"Positively, Mr. Jarrett, if you go on talking in this foolish fashion, I shall have to impose a fine upon you," she rejoined, her whole countenance beaming with delight.

"Any fine imposed upon me by your ladyship would be rapturously ac-

cepted," he said, not able to refrain from laughter.

Then thinking she might wonder at his mirth, and also that he had administered enough sugar—at any rate for the present—he added more seriously :

"By-the-by, where are you going to hunt to-day?"

"I? Oh! with the Gallopers. I get out at the next station——"

"So soon?" interrupted Bob, with a well-simulated sigh.

"Yes, you ridiculous creature. So soon, and what's more, I shan't have any too much time, as I have to ride nearly twelve miles to the meet."

"I had no idea you were so determined a Diana. But won't it make a very long day for you?" he inquired, wondering at her energy.

"It would, only, luckily for me, I am not coming home to-night. A great friend

of mine, a Mrs. St. John, has asked me to stay at her house this evening. In fact, that was the principal reason why I determined to hunt to-day. I wanted to see the Gallopers, and I also wanted to attend a private *séance*, which is to take place to-night at Mrs. St. John's."

"A what?" echoed Bob, in tones of bewilderment.

"A *séance*. Surely you must know what that means."

"Not exactly. There are so many different kinds."

"Mrs. St. John is a firm believer in spiritualism," explained Lady De Fochsey, "and she has invited a well-known medium down from town, on purpose to try and obtain some fresh manifestations. Only a few chosen spirits are to be present."

"Do you go in for that kind of thing?" asked Bob, thinking what a queer mixture his companion was.

“A little,” she answered, dropping her voice to a mysterious whisper. “Mind you don’t tell anybody. I don’t wish it known all over the hunting-field, but I’m developing psychic force.”

“Oh! indeed, and pray how do you develop it?”

“I can’t tell you now. It would take too long, but I will some other time. Unfortunately I don’t get on very fast.”

“How’s that? Uncongenial influences?”

“Yes, partly,” she replied. “The difficult thing is that the electric current, which by many is supposed to be the foundation of all spiritualism, can only be communicated in my case by means of a kindred spirit.”

“And do you mean to tell me that you have never come across one?” asked Bob incredulously.

She looked up at him with an odd, uncertain expression.

"No, Mr. Jarrett, I have not."

Then the blue eyes dropped suddenly, and she added hesitatingly: "But—perhaps—I may now. Who knows?" and up went those azure orbs again, with the most infantine and innocent of looks. Somehow they seemed to go right through Bob, and to produce a most uncomfortable sensation, just as if he were being requested to perform some action which went against the grain. He reddened up to the very roots of his hair, and remained transfixed, as it were, until her gaze was withdrawn. What a queer little mortal she was! He couldn't make her out at all.

Did she intend to convey the idea that *he* was the kindred spirit whose advent had been expected and looked forward to for so many years? His modesty took alarm at the thought.

And yet she was very pretty in her little, neat, got-up style, very pretty—and *very*,

VERY amusing. Nevertheless so embarrassed did he feel by Lady De Fochsey's words and more than gracious manner, that it was quite a relief when the train in which they were travelling rushed into a station, and the lady declared that she had arrived at her destination.

“How quickly the time has gone, to be sure!” she exclaimed regretfully, gathering up her skirt, her hunting crop and her worsted gloves. “I had no idea we were so near Millingboro’! It only shows what an agreeable companion you have been. Good-bye, Mr. Jarrett; don’t forget to come on Sunday.” And she waved the tips of her fingers airily, and hopped out on to the platform before Bob had had time to recover his self-possession.

“Is there nothing I can do for you?” he asked, with a sudden sense of relief. “I will go and see after your horse-box if you like.”

“ My dear, foolish young man, don’t think of such a thing. Why, your train starts again immediately. Ta! ta! And don’t lose your heart in the gay but vicious metropolis.”

So saying Lady De Fochsey walked away, and as the train once more moved off Bob could hear a high-pitched feminine voice, shorn of all its dulcet and melodious intonations, scolding away at an unfortunate groom.

“ Phew ! ” he exclaimed, as he settled himself in his seat, and once more re-lit the cherry-wood pipe. “ That woman’s a rum ‘un, and no mistake. Awful sport, though, if she weren’t quite such a humbug, and didn’t stare at you in such a funny way. I wonder what the deuce she means by it.” And then he thought of somebody who, he would stake his life, was as true and honest as the day ; somebody who did not look at men in that queer,

equivocal fashion, who scorned petty artifices and unjustifiable means of rendering herself attractive, and who, on that very account, was a hundred thousand times more so.

Fancy his talking to Miss Lankester in the free and easy style he had at once adopted when addressing Lady De Fochsey. He could imagine how wide the gray eyes would open with indignant amazement.

And now that he was alone, and removed from her ladyship's fascination, he even blamed himself for having been so familiar. The temptation certainly was great. It takes a very strong man to resist the advances of a good-looking woman. He may pick ever so many holes in her afterwards, but *at the time*, he can't help feeling flattered and amused, and if she gives him an inch, takes a liberal ell. Masculine nature will out.

Furthermore an irresistible sense of

mischief had arisen within Bob's bosom. It was fun—splendid fun, paying the vain little woman high-flown compliments and seeing the avidity with which she swallowed them ; but, nevertheless, when he came calmly to review his own conduct, he was fain to admit that such silly, butterfly specimens of the female sex could not exist unless men encouraged them.

It was the perpetual fostering of their vanity by speeches containing not a germ of truth, but which were accepted by the listener in perfect good faith, that was responsible for so painful and preposterous a pitch of feminine idiotcy.

In his heart of hearts, despite her youth, position, and personal attractions, Bob felt repulsed rather than drawn towards Lady De Fochsey. She represented a type of womanhood which he both pitied and despised. And yet he did not for one instant believe that there was any real harm in

her. She was only silly—very silly and frivolous. But he experienced an uncomfortable conviction, that he had encouraged her to be even more silly and more frivolous, just for his own amusement.

Was this right, or gentlemanly, or honourable?

He preferred not to answer the question.

For he had sense enough, and good feeling enough to know that female credulity, vanity, and folly, all combined, in the absence of much heart and a total deficiency of head-piece, render a woman one of the saddest spectacles on the face of this earth.

As for what had been said between them when one came to analyze the conversation, a single word summed it up.

That word was rubbish—unmitigated rubbish from beginning to end.

Yet, no doubt, this was the way people talked in polite society.

CHAPTER IV.

LEFT IN THE LURCH.

BOB returned from town in an extremely satisfied state of mind. Fortune had favoured him almost beyond his expectations, for on driving to Messrs. Tautz and Son's well-known establishment, in order to be measured for some breeches, he was lucky enough to find a pair that had just been returned which exactly fitted him.

These he purchased on the spot, delighted to have something to fall back upon during the time his own were being made. After enjoining haste, he repaired to another celebrated emporium, and spent a small fortune in boots, gaiters, &c.

Altogether, the day's expedition proved

a great success, and although quite a week, if not more, must elapse before he could array himself in the full glories of a brand new red coat, still as long as his nether limbs were suitably cased, he no longer felt afraid of appearing in the hunting field. Even General Prosieboy would not seem half so formidable when opposed by boots and breeches as immaculate as his own. As for bow-tying, Charles had promised to give him a lesson, and initiate him into all the difficulties of that delicate art.

Bob reached Straightem Court just in time to dress for dinner.

In honour of Miss Lankester he had given orders for the drawing-room to be lit up, and to this room he therefore repaired to receive his guests. The housemaids had been busy most of the forenoon, removing brown holland covers, taking up druggets, and shaking out curtains. Consequently Bob was unprepared for the

gorgeousness now revealed. As he stood warming himself before the fire, with his back leaning against the solid marble mantelpiece, he looked round complacently at the old-fashioned crimson and gilt furniture, the rich velvet hangings, and elaborately decorated walls on which Cupids and cherubims were freely represented. The style of the whole thing was perhaps rather florid, but Bob knew very little of the tenets held by the æsthetic school ; he had not been educated up to the sun-flower and the lily, the bulrush and the peacock, and therefore considered the general appearance of his drawing-room highly satisfactory.

Of course, if later on, Miss Dot wished anything changed, or innovations introduced, she had only to say the word. In matters of taste, Bob was quite willing to defer his judgment to hers. Women knew a great deal more about these things

than men. Besides, they had such a wonderful way of twisting chairs and tables about, and robbing them of all their formality. No room really looked habitable until touched up by a feminine hand. Perhaps Dot might like to have a new carpet. The present one, although handsome, was certainly somewhat too crude in colouring, and too suggestive of Joseph's coat. A grand piano also—he suddenly noticed that the room contained only a cottage instrument of very antiquated appearance—she must have one naturally. It should be the very first present he would make when—when they were engaged.

Thus resolving, the door flew open, and Dr. and Miss Lankester were announced.

The blood rushed up to Bob's face as he went to greet his visitors, and shook the object of his thoughts warmly by the hand, feeling that she, at any rate, was quite an old acquaintance.

"Why, where is Mrs. Lankester?" he inquired of her husband, after they too had gone through the ceremony of hand-shaking. "You have not left her at home, surely?"

"I am sorry to say, Mr. Jarrett, that my wife was unable to accompany us," replied the doctor apologetically. "The fact of the matter is, she is subject to very bad, sick headaches, and unfortunately one attacked her this afternoon."

"I regret to hear that," said Bob politely, disappointed at Mrs. Lankester's absence, since he had been curious to see what manner of woman Dot's mother was.

"We ought perhaps to have sent and let you know," continued Dr. Lankester, "but my wife hoped, up to the very last moment, that she might be able to dine with you to-night, and so put off sending until it was too late."

"The loss is altogether mine I feel

certain," returned Bob in his most cordial manner. "But I shall hope very soon to have another opportunity of making Mrs. Lankester's acquaintance. Tell her we missed her much."

But although he spoke so courteously, after the first moment he did not seem to mind doing without the mamma, as long as he had the daughter. Until now he had hardly trusted himself to look at Dot. He had felt so curiously and unaccountably shy, whilst his heart beat so fast that it seemed to him as if she must hear it. But when he had ensconced her in the most comfortable chair he could find, he summoned up sufficient courage to steal a sidelong glance at her. Hurried as it was, it enabled him to take in all the details.

He could see that she was dressed in some sort of soft, cream-coloured material, made high to the throat, and cut in the simplest possible fashion. No frills, no

furbelows, no flounces. Perhaps if he had been entertaining a party of fine ladies, they might have called Dot's gown skimpy and old-fashioned. Certainly it displayed no artificial protuberance below the waist, or deficiency of stuff above. If it was skimpy it was skimpy only as regarded the skirt, not the body. But whatever might have been its defects, to Bob's mind Miss Lankester's gown suited the wearer to perfection.

The clinging muslin outlined her slight form admirably, displaying its rounded curves to far better advantage than the costliest silk or satin. Above the soft, creamy folds rose her slender throat, and shapely, well-poised head, whose stag-like carriage was full of grace and beauty, and constituted one of her chief attractions.

There was no doubt about it, she was very pretty—prettier even than he had believed her to be; whilst the singularly

honest expression of her face rendered it to him, at least, peculiarly fascinating. Then he looked critically at her father standing within a few feet of him. Doctor Lankester was a handsome man. It was easy to see from whom his daughter had inherited her good looks. He had the same straight, delicate features, the same colouring, and clear, grey eyes, with large dark pupils, which in some lights appeared almost black. Like Dot, he was short rather than tall, but slender and perfectly proportioned.

“ Well, and what have you been doing with yourself to-day, Mr. Jarrett ? ” Dr. Lankester asked of his host, as soon as the first bustle of their arrival had subsided. “ I suppose you did not go out hunting. The meet was a long way off.”

“ It was,” answered Bob. “ And therefore I profited by the opportunity to take a run up to town.”

“Indeed! And how was town looking?”

“Simply filthy. When I left here about half-past eight o’clock this morning it was the most lovely day imaginable—a bright sun and a blue sky—but as we neared London a dense curtain of fog arose, which grew thicker and thicker every moment. As for the atmosphere, it was laden with smuts, dirt, and every kind of abomination, which got into my eyes, down my throat, and up my nostrils. I never was more thankful in my life than to get back to fresh country air that did not poison one’s lungs. Phew! I can feel it now.”

“And yet people who live in London don’t seem to mind the fogs one bit,” remarked Dot.

“I suppose they get accustomed to them,” returned Bob. “But it would take me a very long time to become acclimatized.” And as he spoke he began

to cough, the impure air to which he was not habituated having evidently irritated his throat to a considerable degree.

Dot looked up.

"Have you got a cold, Mr. Jarrett?" she asked with concern.

"Yes, I believe I have managed to catch a slight one. Somehow or other I have felt shivery ever since yesterday's wetting."

"Then you should take care of yourself," said Dr. Lankester in a kindly, but semi-professional manner.

"Too much bother," answered Bob lightly, with all a strong young man's disdain of coddling. "I never think anything of a cold. Besides, it's really nothing. Not worth talking about."

But as he said the words, he coughed again, and this time worse than before.

Doctor Lankester glanced at him, and saw that he was flushed, and showed every symptom of having contracted a chill.

"Very likely not," he said quietly. "But you must remember, Mr. Jarrett, that you are not used to our English climate. It is a very treacherous one, I assure you, and few people can afford to take liberties with it. The winters are often extremely severe, especially of late years, when in some parts of the country the thermometer has registered as many as twenty degrees of frost."

The conversation was here interrupted by the entrance of the butler, who announced that dinner was ready. No Englishman is ever indifferent to this acceptable summons, and Dr. Lankester at once ceased talking, and waited politely for his host to make a move.

Bob gave his arm to Dot, regretting that he had been unable to provide an agreeable, elderly lady for her father.

"It is so good of you to come in this sort of way," he said apologetically. "I

wish I could have asked some people to meet you, but the fact of the matter is, I don't know anybody yet."

"I'm very glad you didn't," answered Dot with characteristic frankness. "My father and I will enjoy a quiet evening alone with you ever so much more. You see," she added brightly, "we look upon you as a novelty. You can tell us all kind of things we know little or nothing of, whereas Mrs. Smith or Mrs. Jones—dear, excellent people as they may be—only prattle away about their domestic concerns with which we are already thoroughly conversant."

Bob laughed.

"I'm so awfully afraid you'll find it dull," he said.

"Dull!" looking up at him with sparkling eyes. "That is paying yourself an exceedingly bad compliment, Mr. Jarrett. As for me, I am a pretty good hand at

amusing myself. There is a great deal of enjoyment to be got out of life, if only one has a sense of the ridiculous and cultivates the faculty of applying it to everyday trifles. Besides, you forget that a visit to Straightem Court is quite an event in our humble experience."

"Why? Did you not come here often in Captain Straightem's time?"

"Often? No. We came exactly once a year. Every spring we were invited to a formal luncheon at the conclusion of the hunting season. We invariably met our clergyman and his wife, whom as you may imagine we see frequently, and the county solicitor and his married daughter. This lunch was evidently a duty affair. It could not possibly be mistaken for anything else. The conversation was lame and forced on both sides. We asked after the sport and the hounds, our host after our individual health, and how we had got through the

winter. After these civilities had been exchanged, we fell back upon eating and drinking. As for poor Captain Straightem, it was impossible to help pitying him. He looked so superlatively miserable, and so infinitely bored. Altogether, the relief was immense when the festivity came to an end, and the strain was over. But," she concluded, pulling up short, "I ought not to talk in this sort of way, now that Captain Straightem is dead and gone."

"I am surprised at what you tell me," said Bob, who had listened attentively to his companion's observations. "I can't imagine how my uncle could have lived so near to you without getting to be on very friendly terms."

For his part, he felt convinced that if he were to see Miss Dot only a few times more, his feelings would inevitably become something even warmer than friendly. He was irresistibly drawn towards her.

“ You don’t seem to know much of Captain Straightem,” said the young lady seriously. “ If you did, you could not fancy him capable of being on what you call ‘ friendly terms’ with people in our lowly position.”

“ What was he like? ” asked Bob with considerable curiosity.

“ He was a very gentlemanly man,” she replied. “ Exceedingly quiet and reserved in his manner, and always remarkably neatly dressed. Further than that, I can tell you nothing, except that somehow or other he invariably contrived to make you feel that he looked upon you as an inferior.”

“ By Jove! ” exclaimed Bob, “ but that’s exactly the way some of these swells made me feel yesterday.”

“ Did they? ” said Dot. “ Then I can sympathize with you, Mr. Jarrett, for I know from experience that it is by no

means a comfortable sensation. I do not mind a bit on my own account, but I do mind on father's. He is so clever and well-informed, and I can't bear to see him snubbed by people who have not as much in their whole bodies as he has in his little finger."

"And does not Dr. Lankester resent such conduct?"

"No," she answered spiritedly. "I have to resent it for him. Father has far too large a mind to take notice of trifles."

"He has a warm champion, at any rate. It must be very nice to have somebody to stick up for one," said Bob. "I only wish——"

But he was unable to conclude the sentence, for having marched down a long corridor, they had now reached the dining-room, and after seating themselves at table, were soon discussing an excellent dinner. The meal passed very pleasantly.

Dr. Lankester was not only a good talker, but had the rare art of inducing those with whom he came in contact to talk also. He would start a subject, and when it was fairly launched through the shallows of polite conversation, adopt the *rôle* of listener. Before long Bob found himself describing his life in Australia, the soil, climate, government and a hundred different things, in all of which Dr. Lankester appeared to take an interest.

Dot did not say much; nevertheless, from the animated expression of her countenance, it was easy to tell that her silence did not proceed from stupidity, but rather from modesty, youth, and a highly receptive faculty, which rendered it a delight to sit still and listen, whilst others were talking sensibly.

They lingered long over their wine. Dot had made a movement as if to leave the gentlemen to themselves, but Bob

particularly requested her to remain. Consequently it was nearly a quarter past nine before they rose from the table.

“Would you like to smoke a cigar, doctor?” asked Bob, “because, if so, we can go into my little snugger, provided, of course, that Miss Lankester does not object.”

“Oh! never mind Dot,” he answered with paternal confidence. “She is quite accustomed to the smell of tobacco, and always keeps me company over my post-prandial pipe.”

Upon this, the trio adjourned to a small, cosy apartment of which Bob had taken special possession, and which being one of the oftenest used, was about the most comfortable room in the house. Three capacious easy chairs were dragged in front of the fire, and herein they seated themselves. There was something pleasant and informal about this arrangement, which

the hard-working doctor, for one, highly preferred to the red-and-gold glories of the drawing-room. He had had a long day, and thoroughly enjoyed stretching his weary limbs before the hearth, and deliberately puffing away at the fragrant cigar which Bob had just handed to him.

They were settling down to a quiet, peaceful evening, when the general harmony was disturbed by the delivery of a note for Doctor Lankester.

He opened it a trifle impatiently. Calm and easy-going as he was, the moment proved inopportune. "Dear me!" he exclaimed in accents of vexation, when he had read the letter through, springing to his feet as he spoke. "This is terribly annoying, and the worst of my profession. One never can be at rest for two minutes at a time."

"What is the matter, father?" inquired Dot.

“A summons to a bad confinement case. I must go at once. The woman’s life is in danger. I wish to goodness people would give over having babies, or else that they would time their entry into the world at more convenient hours.”

Poor Doctor Lankester! He was very, very tired, else he never would have spoken in this manner.

“Must you really go?” asked Bob.

“Yes, I am sorry to say I must, and that at once. The case is a very urgent one, and I should reproach myself for ever if I allowed my own love of comfort to prevent me from going to the poor creature’s assistance.” And he threw away his cigar, as if trying to resist temptation.

Suddenly he remembered his daughter.

“Dot, my girl,” he said, addressing her, “what’s to be done? I shall have to take the carriage, since every minute is of importance.”

“All right, father,” she answered cheerfully, “I will go and get my shawl at once.”

“Stop a bit, Dot. You don’t quite understand the situation. I can’t possibly take you with me.”

“Why not, father, can you not drop me on the road?”

“No, I have to go in quite a contrary direction. The only plan will be for you to stay here until I can send the carriage back—that is to say, if Mr. Jarrett has no objection.”

Bob expressed his extreme satisfaction with the proposed arrangement. He liked Dr. Lankester uncommonly, but he liked his daughter better, and looked forward with delight to a most agreeable *tête-à-tête*.

But the young lady did not altogether appear to relish the idea. A shade of displeasure passed over her sunny face.

“I think that I had better come with

you, father," she said in the same tones of gentle dignity Bob remembered her using once before. "I could wait in the carriage, just as well as here."

"No," he replied. "It would only fidget me to think that you were there. Besides, it is quite likely I may have to send Tomson into town, to fetch medicines at the dispensary, in which case you might never get home all night. Leave it to me, and I will either send the carriage back as soon as possible, or else order a fly."

"I can walk back," said Dot resolutely. "It's no distance, and my shoes are tolerably thick."

Evidently the *tête-à-tête* was not to her mind, or else she disliked its being forced upon her without her giving her consent.

While this discussion was going on, Bob stood by, feeling a perfect beast. There were horses enough and carriages enough

too in his stables, doing nothing at that very moment, but he never offered to produce them for Miss Lankester's benefit. The single brougham would have conveyed her most snugly back to her home. Yet he said not a word.

The truth was, his imagination had taken fire at the bare thought of getting Dot all alone to himself for half an hour, or with good luck, perhaps even a whole one. He felt thoroughly ashamed of his conduct. He did not attempt to excuse it in any way, but the temptation was too strong to be resisted, and he maintained an obstinate silence. Even when once the girl looked appealingly at him, he made no offer of lending a vehicle. Dot, on her side, though she knew quite well that there were any number in the coachhouse, was far too proud to beg for the loan of one. Only for the first time, she experienced a kind of hostility against her host. He might

have helped her out of her difficulty, and he had refused to do so.

“ Well,” said Dr. Lankester, giving himself a stretch, “ there’s no peace for the wicked, and I must be off. Good night, Jarrett. Thanks for your hospitality.”

“ And am I really to stay here, father?” asked poor Dot in consternation.

“ Yes, child. I thought we had settled all that. I will send the carriage back if I can, but if it is not here by half-past ten, and I am unable to get a fly, I have no doubt that Mr. Jarrett will kindly let one of his men-servants see you safely home.”

“ I will see her home myself,” said Bob effusively, suddenly finding his tongue, now that matters were definitely arranged according to his desires.

“ All right, then; I leave her in your hands.” And so saying Dr. Lankester hurried off, leaving his daughter a prey

to a whole host of curiously mixed sensations.

In many ways the village doctor was a strangely simple and unworldly man. Despite his forty odd years, it apparently never entered his head to think that there was anything the least unusual in letting Dot remain by herself, at a tolerably late hour of night, in the house of a young bachelor acquaintance who, most ordinary people would have perceived, admired her immensely.

He would have been astounded if anyone had suggested such a thing.

But Dot's perceptions were sharper.

Her maidenly instincts rebelled against the situation.

She knew the innocence and simplicity of her father's nature, but for once she wished that he possessed a little more of that worldly cunning of which her mother owned so large a share.

She liked Mr. Jarrett very much. He was very kind, very nice, very polite. But every now and then she had felt his eyes fixed upon her in an embarrassing manner, and once when she looked up, and happened to intercept their gaze, there was a look in them which troubled her not a little.

She could not understand it, and Dot Lankester was a young woman who did not care for things she did not understand.



CHAPTER V.

AN OFFER OF A “MOUNT.”

BOB saw Dr. Lankester out at the hall door as in courtesy bound; and for a minute or two Dot was left to her own resources. During this time she took herself seriously to task for her disinclination to be left alone with Mr. Jarrett. It really was ridiculous to mind, and it would be doubly, trebly absurd to allow him to guess that she experienced any reluctance. She had already stated her wish to accompany her father, but since he had decided otherwise, the best plan now was to try and appear totally unconcerned, and altogether at her ease. Even delicacy might be carried to too great an extent.

Luckily her conscience was free. The situation had been none of her choosing, and undoubtedly the wisest course was to attach as little importance to it as possible. In this manner did she argue, endeavouring, by the aid of common sense and calm reasoning, to make light of the whole business. She succeeded so far that by the time Bob re-entered the room she contrived to smother the temporary resentment she had felt against him, and to all appearances was quiet, indifferent and self-possessed. But she did not attempt to commence the conversation, and for a few seconds a somewhat awkward silence prevailed. If Dot's conscience was at rest, Bob's was far from being so. He could not divest himself of an inward conviction that he had behaved traitorously towards his guest. Moreover he entertained an uncomfortable belief that she shared the same opinion, and in her inmost mind criticized his

conduct severely. Well, he must try and make up for past misdemeanours, and do all he could to regain her esteem.

Dot had risen from her seat, and was now standing leaning with one arm against the mantelpiece, in a pose full of unconscious grace. The bright flames from the fire cast flickering shadows on her light dress and grave, downcast face. They lit up her soft brown tresses with gleams of gold, and made the small head and slender pillar-like throat stand out in high relief against the dark oak panelling.

A thrill went through Bob's frame as he looked at her. She had no positive claim to beauty, but her air of quiet refinement, her youth, her freshness, her total freedom from coquetry, rendered her in his eyes the most attractive woman he had ever come across. He admired her immensely, and yet he feared her a little. He doubted the reception his advances might meet with.

She inspired an unusual sense of self-distrust and timidity. Therefore he resolved to be more than commonly prudent, to guard against any hasty impulse carrying him away, and above all, to do and say nothing that might directly or indirectly give the alarm to her maidenly susceptibilities. Miss Lankester and Lady De Fochsey were evidently two very different types of womanhood. The same plan of procedure could not be indiscriminately adopted with them both.

At last the silence grew so prolonged that Bob was constrained to break it.

"Will you not sit down, Miss Lankester?" he said in studiously correct tones. "You will get tired of standing." And he drew the chair she had already occupied a trifle nearer.

It must be owned that Dot did not receive this suggestion very graciously. Before replying she glanced at the clock;

then, with a suppressed sigh of impatience, answered :

“ Yes, I suppose I may as well. The carriage can’t possibly be here just yet.”

Bob felt nettled by the remark. It implied a desire to escape at the very earliest opportunity.

“ You seem in a most tremendous hurry to get away,” he said with considerable asperity. “ I am sorry that you should be so awfully bored.”

Dot blushed up to the very roots of her hair.

“ Oh ! no indeed,” she said lamely, “ I’m not the least bit bored.”

“ Are you not ? Then all I can say is, your manner belies your words. Is there nothing I can do to amuse you ? Don’t you even care to look at books or photographs, since you appear disinclined to talk ? ”

“ I don’t want amusing, Mr. Jarrett.

You labour under a mistake in fancying that I do."

"So you said before. But from personal observation I am rude enough to disbelieve the statement. If you were contented where you are, you would not count the minutes quite so anxiously."

"You seem to forget," rejoined Dot, with an attempt at archness, "that we country people are ~~early~~ early birds, who become sleepy and stupid unless we go to roost at our accustomed hour."

"Am ~~I~~ I to understand, then, that you retire to rest at half-past nine every day of your life?"

"Well, no, not perhaps quite so early."

"You are tired on this particular evening? Is that it?"

"No, not at all."

"Not bored, not tired!" said Bob musingly. "Then I can only arrive at one solution."

He waited for a moment, as if hoping his companion would inquire what it was, but as she did not speak, he went on more impetuously : “The fact of the matter is, Miss Lankester, you still persist in treating me like a stranger, from whom all manner of evil is to be expected. Do you imagine I am going to eat you ?” And he turned a pair of very reproachful eyes upon her, whose injured expression seemed to render her shortcomings painfully apparent.

She gave a forced laugh, and blamed herself for having been so ridiculously prudish.

“ No. I do not flatter myself that I should prove a very palatable morsel ; and as for being a stranger—were you not one only quite a short while ago ?”

“ Yes. It is kind of you to remind me of the fact,” he answered stiffly, “ though I was in no danger of forgetting it.” Then, determined not to quarrel with her, he

added in a gentler key: "It was my fault, of course, but somehow or other when you were so good as to help me through my gate difficulty, I was foolish enough to imagine that you were a little more human and not quite so ceremonious as the rest of them."

This time Dot laughed outright. His remarks were extremely naïve, and made her begin to wonder why she had distrusted him.

"Come, Mr. Jarrett, confess. Do I look very ceremonious at the present moment?" lying back in the arm-chair with a gesture of abandonment, and resting her small brown head against the cushions, whilst her eyes shone with fun and mischief.

Both the words and the attitude pleased him, and took away his sense of soreness.

"No, I can't say that you do. But you did a little while ago, when you were in two minds about sitting down."

“ And do you really think me as bad as the ‘rest of them’ ? ” mimicking his aggrieved tones.

“ I shan’t reply to that question, for fear my answer might offend you,” responded Bob, his face beaming with delight, this sudden transition to a playful mood making the blood course like wildfire through his veins. Then, with a strong effort he controlled the desire to tell her his exact thoughts, and said hesitatingly :

“ Of course you know very little about me at present, Miss Dot—I beg pardon, I mean Miss Lankester—but—but,” beginning to flounder in his speech, “ I should like to set your mind at rest in one particular.”

“ What is that, Mr. Jarrett? I was not aware my mind was uneasy.”

“ Yes, it is. Excuse me for contradicting you so flatly, but I can see it quite plainly. The real truth is, you are afraid of me, and

—and," turning very red, " upon my soul you need not be."

The blush on her companion's face reproduced itself on Dot's.

" I'm not afraid of you—not a bit," she vowed more emphatically than truthfully, for she felt humiliated by Bob's declaration, and by the keenness of his perceptions.

" Oh ! I thought you were."

She plucked up sufficient courage to ask, " Why ? "

" Because you showed so very plainly your dislike to being left alone in my society."

He had been piqued by her conduct, and man-like could not conceal his pique as a woman would have done. It might not be wise to speak out thus freely on so short an acquaintance, but for the life of him, he could not hold his tongue.

Dot, however, felt too guilty to attempt to deny the accusation. She only mar-

velled at his powers of penetration, having hitherto flattered herself that she had managed to disguise her sentiments pretty well. Either she must have acted her part very badly, or Mr. Jarrett must be a good deal sharper than most gentlemen.

Fortunately for Dot, Bob having secretly enjoyed the confusion depicted upon her countenance, was generous enough to start the conversation afresh, and this time in a different channel. He had no intention of pressing her too sorely. His object had merely been to let her see he was not wholly devoid of observation. She was a bad dissembler, and in his heart of hearts he liked her all the better for it. A girl who could tell stories readily, must have a flaw somewhere in her composition.

“Don’t you ever go out hunting, Miss Lankester?” he inquired.

In a second, Dot’s whole manner changed. A wonderful thaw set in. All

the coldness and the frigidity vanished as if by magic. They were on safe ground at last, and she was her own, natural self again. The need of defence, which constitutes a maiden's armour, departed.

"Oh! yes, sometimes," she answered vivaciously. "But not very often, I'm sorry to say."

"How's that?"

"Father won't allow me to go alone, and it is only on very rare occasions that he can steal a holiday."

"Is Dr. Lankester fond of the sport?"

"He loves it, when he gets the chance. Do you know," and Dot lowered her voice confidentially, "nobody goes better than father, when he happens to be mounted on a decent horse, which, however, is not often. Every one declares what a wonderful eye he has got for a country, and how marvellously quick he is in following hounds."

"And do you go where he does?" inquired Bob with interest, though he did not like the idea of Dot's delicate frame being exposed to danger.

"I used to always," she answered proudly. "But," stifling a sigh, "the last year or two poor Mouse has failed sadly. She is very old and has quite lost her speed."

"Why don't you get another horse, then?" asked Bob somewhat inconsiderately.

She looked at him. Even the sharpest men were curiously dense in some ways.

"For the very simple reason, Mr. Jarrett, that my father is, comparatively speaking, a poor man, and we cannot afford to indulge in many expensive amusements. If we could, we should both go out hunting a very great deal more frequently than we do."

"In short," said Bob, "you have nothing to ride but Mouse."

"No, nothing, but I am very lucky to have her, and it is only when hounds happen to run really hard, and I hear her poor heart go pit-a-pat, pit-a-pat, under me, and have the mortification of seeing everybody pass me by, that I can't help feeling annoyed, and envying people who are better mounted than myself. It is so delightful to be on a good horse," she continued enthusiastically, "and not always to have to think of cutting off corners, and easing up hills, and walking through ploughs. Besides, nothing puts one off one's riding more, than following some cunning old hand, who knows every gate in the country, and who pulls up at each gap in turn, to inquire of the multitude what sort of a place it is, and then either gallops swiftly away, or takes ten minutes making up his mind whether he will or will not, according to the nature of the answers received. It ruins a person's nerve."

“ I should dearly like to lend you one of my horses,” said Bob eagerly. “ There are ever so many more in the stables than I want for my own use, and I feel sure two or three of them would carry a lady to perfection.”

Dot’s face brightened at the mere suggestion. She was passionately fond of fox-hunting, and of everything connected therewith. Her love of sport was genuine, and inherited from her father, who came of a good horse-racing Yorkshire family. Bob could not possibly have held out a greater temptation. Nevertheless, she had many scruples as to accepting the offer so generously made. To begin with, it would place her under an obligation.

“ You are very kind, Mr. Jarrett,” she said gratefully. “ More than kind, indeed, to hint at such a thing ; but I do not think my father would allow me to ride any one else’s horses. There is always a certain

amount of risk about the proceeding, and if there was a good scent, and I got warmed up, I could not help 'going' and doing my very best to keep with hounds."

"I'll take all the risk," he answered. "Come," persuasively, "what do you say? If I can succeed in overcoming Dr. Lankester's objections, will you grant me this small favour—for it is one, I assure you—and let me have the pleasure of mounting you now and again?"

Dot hesitated before replying. It was awfully nice of him, he was quite restored to her good graces, but—ought she to yield to the temptation however great it might be, and was? What was the use of her cultivating her taste for hunting, when the circumstances of her life were such that in all probability she would have very little opportunity of gratifying it hereafter. And then Dot's imagination wandered far away.

“ Well, what do you say ? ” Bob asked again. “ Can’t you make up your mind ? ”

She looked him straight in the face with clear and kindly eyes. She was touched by the sincerity of his offer.

“ I don’t know what to say, Mr. Jarrett, except to thank you for your most generous proposition.”

“ But that is no answer, Miss Lankester. None whatever.”

“ It is the only one I can give at the present moment.”

“ May I speak to your father ? Have I your permission ? ”

“ I—I—think you had better not.” And she began twisting her pocket-handkerchief about.

But in spite of these words, Bob could see by her manner that she was yielding. If he pressed the point only a little more he would overrule her objections ; and then—what cross-country delights, what

feats performed together, what long, delicious rides home in the frosty twilight! His pulses thrilled at the mere thought of them. There would no longer be any question of scheming to obtain a miserable half-hour of her society. And when she was pleased and amused, and owed her pleasure and amusement to him, perhaps she might grow to care for him a little bit.



CHAPTER VI.

BOB MAKES A BAD USE OF HIS OPPORTUNITY.

CAN even the best of men help their thoughts being selfish, especially when their passions are aroused? It is questionable. At all events, there was a leaven of self-interest in those that instantaneously rose to Bob's mind. He could not refrain from realizing that in benefiting Dot, he would benefit himself a hundred thousand times more. Consequently he grew increasingly urgent.

“I shall attack your father the very next time I see him,” he said decidedly. “It’s a downright shame for you not to have a good horse when you ride so well, and are so fond of hunting.”

His energy and determination quite carried Dot away. She felt as if it were almost impossible to resist them, when directly subjected to their influence; for there are qualities which, when displayed by one of the opposite sex, possess a strange power of subjugating a woman, even against her better judgment. She likes to find all her objections answered, all her scruples overruled just now and again. It makes her say to herself; “Well! I have done a foolish thing, but it really was not my fault. I had no choice left me.”

So instead of sticking to her colours, Dot deserted them basely, and said with a faint smile, for she was conscious of her weakness, and condemned it:

“I am afraid that if I let you have your way, you will spoil me altogether, Mr. Jarrett.”

“Spoil you!” he ejaculated. “By jingo!

I only wish I had the chance. Should you object to being spoilt by me, Miss Lankester?"

The question slipped out almost before he was aware of it, and then he could have bitten off the tip of his tongue, in his fear of having gone too far.

It was almost a relief, and yet—with the contrariety of masculine nature, he could not help feeling vexed as well, to find no reply forthcoming. Indeed, Dot appeared not to have heard the interrogation. Her face assumed an anxious, listening expression.

"Hark," she said, "is not that the sound of wheels?"

"No, I don't hear anything," rejoined Bob shortly, wishing the expected conveyance at the bottom of the sea.

"I am almost sure it was the carriage," she said uneasily.

"Oh! never mind if it is. It is so

jolly sitting here talking, and there's no hurry."

She began moving restlessly about the room. Presently she said, unable to control her impatience any longer :

"Mr. Jarrett, I feel certain the carriage is here. Would you mind ringing the bell and asking ?"

It was impossible to refuse so direct a request. Bob reluctantly did her bidding, and when the man-servant appeared, it seemed that Dot's ears had played her false. No vehicle had arrived.

"Are you sure?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes, miss, quite sure. I looked out of the 'all door myself just 'afore I came up."

"It's very odd," she said, rising to her feet as soon as Charles had withdrawn. "Something must have happened, or else father has forgotten all about me."

"That's not the least likely," said Bob.

"Daughters can't be ignored altogether so easily."

"Well, anyhow, I must be going."

He felt provoked by her persistence. It showed him plainly that he had not succeeded in setting her at ease.

"Without exception," he exclaimed, half in jest, half in earnest, "you are the most fidgety and tenacious person I ever encountered."

"Thank you," she replied, dropping him a mock courtesy. "Anything else?"

"May I ask, Miss Lankester, how you intend to get home?"

She walked across the room, and drawing the curtains a little aside, looked out of the window. Just at first she could distinguish nothing, but after a few seconds she saw the stars shining with frosty radiance, and a big white moon illumining all the heavens with her cold and mystic rays. It might be a bit chilly

out of doors, but at any rate there was no fear of rain. The night was calm and still, the lawn already whitening over with silvery hoar frost. Her resolution was taken without delay. There could be no reason why she should wait any longer.

“ I shall walk.”

“ By Jove! No, that you shan’t,” he protested.

“ Who is to prevent me?” a spirit of opposition rising within her breast.

“ I will. If you are really in earnest about going, my brougham is of course at your disposal.”

“ Thank you very much,” she rejoined, in tones which he could not help fancying conveyed a touch of reproach, “ but it is too late—now.”

Without doubt, there was an emphasis on the last word. The blood flew to his face.

“ Spare me,” he cried, with impetuous self-accusation. “ I know quite well what

a beast I have been, and that I ought to have ordered out the brougham ever so long ago."

"There was no law to render the action obligatory," said Dot coldly.

"Perhaps not, but I knew that you did not like being left here, and wanted to get away."

"You need not blame yourself, Mr. Jarrett. I stayed by my father's wish."

"Yes, but I did all I could to keep you. There! now the murder is out." And Bob gazed penitently at her. "Had I chosen, I might have helped you out of your difficulty in a second."

No doubt he had his faults, but he was a good fellow, and honest to the core. She could not feel angry with him for long, especially when he looked so contrite for what, after all, was only a small offence. Besides, it was making a mountain out of a mole-hill.

"It seems to me," she said pleasantly, "that if you have failed as a host, I have failed as a guest, so we may as well cry quits, and make our peace. Good-bye, Mr. Jarrett." And she held out her hand.

"You are not going to walk home, surely?" he said.

"Yes, I am. It is only a step, and nobody will run away with me."

"I can't possibly let you go like this," he expostulated in genuine distress. "Do wait a little longer."

"Out of the question. It has already struck half-past ten, and mother will be wondering what has become of us. She does not know that father may have to spend the night away from home."

Bob admitted the force of this objection, and accompanied his companion down the corridor that led to the hall. As he passed a hat-stand he seized his hat.

"What is that for?" asked Dot.

“To put on my head. I am coming with you.”

“Oh, no, indeed, Mr. Jarrett! I can’t allow you to do any such thing. You have been to London to-day and are certainly tired, and have a bad cold into the bargain.”

“Excuse me, Miss Lankester, but you must let me have my own way in this. I have failed in my duty as a host once—you yourself have just said so—and I hope it may be a long time before I make a similar mistake.”

Dot was in consternation. To use a vulgar simile, she felt that she had only jumped out of the frying-pan into the fire. And yet there was an air of decision about Bob which effectually prevented her from indulging in any further remonstrances. It was quite clear that whether she approved, or whether she didn’t, he intended to abide by his decision. She liked him, too, in this

authoritative mood. The manliness of his nature came out.

She actually let him wrap her up in one of his great-coats, and stood quite meekly while he buttoned the buttons. He was awfully slow about it, but she did not attempt to hasten his movements. For the time being he had gained a certain mastery over her.

But when he handed her a warm shooting-cap, and insisted upon her putting it on, she once more found her tongue. He was so portentously serious that she felt bound to make light of the situation.

“I declare,” she said, looking saucily up at him from under the projecting peak of her head-gear, “you have turned me into a regular man. How do I look? Like a masher?”

“Look!” he echoed, his head going from him all of a sudden, “as you always do—charming.”

She turned her head away, and said petulantly :

“ For goodness sake, Mr. Jarrett, don’t treat me like a fashionable young lady, to whom compliments are as the salt of existence. I hate them—nasty, insincere things.”

“ But they are not always insincere,” responded Bob in self-defence.

“ In that case, they are superfluous. And now shall we make a start ? ”

Bob’s spirits felt thoroughly damped. He did not offer to make any reply to this speech. One thing was clear : Dot Lankester wholly differed from the majority of her sex. She was not to be approached through her vanity. A strange girl this, who grew positively angry when men professed to admire her, but how charming a one to the lucky fellow whose admiration she might deign to receive. Bob wondered if the “ lucky fellow ” existed, and grew

miserable at the mere thought. Then he comforted himself by arguing that she was so young. She did not look a day over eighteen, and it was not likely in this quiet country village that anybody had already snapped her up. Besides, she did not seem like a girl given to matrimony, but very much the reverse. He should not take his rebuffs quite so deeply to heart if he could but make sure there were no rivals in the field. The very idea of some great, hairy man (other than himself) having the right to put his arm round Dot's waist, and kiss her little, flower-like face, filled him with anger and disgust. An Australian might possibly be worthy of her, but an Englishman—never!

Meanwhile they walked down the drive in absolute silence.

The spreading trees with bare, black twigs formed a canopy over their heads, through whose interstices shone the dark-

ling sky, deep indigo in hue ; whilst the cold stars glittered like diamond facets, and the big moon cast sharp shadows on the path, which made the white road even whiter, when contrasted with their sombre outlines.

Night, with its still serenity, had hushed mother earth to sleep, and the stars and moon and the pure vaulted sky guarded the weary dame's slumbers. Peace descended with the mystic frost, that touched the trees with ghostly fingers and fantastically laid on every blade of grass a hoary rime which would have done credit to a fairy's web.

Peace, and silence, and solemnity—these were the characteristics of the hour, and yet Bob's poor, passionate heart, that joy or curse of human beings, beat with tumultuous beats. Scarce could he stifle his emotion. The calm of his surroundings failed to quiet it. For — and a

great yearning flooded his being at the thought—he was so near to her and yet so far !

So near—that if he stretched out his hand, he could have taken hers in his ; so far—that in giving the slightest expression to his sentiments, he at once raised up a barrier between them. Once as they walked along, she stumbled over some fallen stone which lay in the road, and he offered her his arm. Oh ! how he longed for her to take it—to feel her little wrist quivering upon his sleeve.

He dared not speak, he only shot one mute glance of appeal from his veiled and troubled eyes.

She refused the proffered member with a stately gesture of the head.

Bob literally trembled as he walked by her side. It was ridiculous. He had never been afraid of any one in his life before. There were some who even

accused him of being an audacious flirt, and yet this little slip of a girl, who was hardly more than a child, rendered him as timid and as hesitating as a hare just startled from its form. If this was love, surely he had taken the epidemic in a very disagreeable form ; and if it were not love, what else could it be ?

They continued down the avenue, until they passed through the iron gates which separated the Park from the village. Emerging from the shadow of the trees a flood of brilliant moonlight greeted them, converting every homely red-brick cottage into a veritable work of art.

It enveloped Dot's girlish form in one sheet of radiance, and lit up each feature of her expressive young face. Her companion's attention was arrested by its rapt and dreamy look. If his thoughts had strayed, hers had evidently wandered also, for she never even noticed his steady gaze,

or heard the sigh with which, at last, he forced himself to withdraw his eyes.

The influences of night prevailed. A spell descended upon them both, though it worked differently. *He* thought only of *her*. She?—Ah! who can travel the paths along which a maiden's fancies meander?

Soon they stood under the rustic porch of Dr. Lankester's house.

Then Dot woke up from her dream, and gave a long, soft sigh.

“Is anything the matter?” said Bob anxiously. “Are you cold?”

“Not a bit, thank you. I can't tell you how I have enjoyed the walk home.”

“I'm glad to hear it,” he answered, feeling flattered even in spite of the conviction that her enjoyment was not attributable to him.

“It has been such a lovely evening, and—” lowering her voice, “I was thinking—”

Of whom? He burned to ask the question, but did not dare.

She gave herself a little shake as if to shake her spirit free of some enchantment.

"It is too late to ask you in," she said, "but I hope you will come another time."

"You have only to give the invitation for me to accept it, Miss Lankester."

Then, as they were on the point of parting, her conscience smote her for having behaved a trifle ungraciously to him. If only he could be brought to understand, all would go well; but she could not offer her undivided friendship until that point had been reached. In the meantime she was sorry to have rendered his evening less agreeable than he had anticipated.

She guessed this to be the case from his altered and downcast manner.

"Good night, Mr. Jarrett," she said frankly. "I am afraid I have proved a

very bad companion. Will you forgive me all my misdemeanours?"

His face brightened instantaneously. The demand was put with such an air of pretty penitence.

" You have not got any shortcomings for me to forgive."

" Under the circumstances, you are very indulgent," she answered with a smile.

That smile was fatal. It made him forget all his good resolutions. The blood rushed up to his boyish face, and he said impulsively :

" It is pleasure enough for me to be near you, even when you don't care to talk. I should never ask for more."

And then he was frightened—frightened at the effect his words would produce. Do not laugh at him. The truest wooers are often the most bashful.

Moonbeam after moonbeam poured into the porch, as they stood waiting for the

door to be opened. By their light he could see her eyes narrow, the delicate brow contract, and the whole expression of her face change. He cursed his own imprudence.

“Mr. Jarrett,” she said in a constrained voice, “you expressed a wish that you and I should be friends. Please understand distinctly that I cannot undertake to remain so unless you give up the habit of making flowery speeches on every possible and impossible occasion.”

“I—I’m awfully sorry,” muttered Bob in abject confusion, wringing her hand in a vice-like grasp. “Good-bye, I won’t do it again, and—and—I shan’t forget about the horse,” striding hastily away.

The horse? Did he think he could bribe her with that?

“Mr. Jarrett,” she called after him, in a clear voice, “wait one minute, please. . I have something to say.”

“Yes,” stopping short, “what is it?”

“About your kind offer—I—I can’t accept it.”

“You can’t! Why not?”

“Because I feel convinced that it would be better for me not to do so.”

And with this exceedingly unsatisfactory reply Dot vanished into the house, leaving Bob to trudge back to Straightem Court in the worst of humours and the lowest possible spirits.

For he saw quite clearly that the fortress was not to be carried by a *coup de main*.

In his ardour he had imagined there would be no delay—his courtship would go smoothly. He would pay Miss Lankester a great deal of attention, to which she would respond in a suitable manner; then propose and be accepted. That was how the course of true love should always run, and how he had mapped it out in his own mind.

And now, instead of a swift impetuous channel, coursing madly down towards the smiling ocean of matrimony, he saw nothing but a little devious stream, blocked by every kind of impediment. His ideas had been subjected to a very severe shock.

He realized that Dot Lankester could not be “rushed” into marriage. He had been in far too great a hurry. Instead of going to work cautiously, and inspiring her first with confidence, then friendship, and finally with the desired passion, he had made a mess of the whole business, and done nothing but establish a feeling of constraint which would now take several days, if not weeks, to efface. In short, he had frightened her. He knew it by the tone of her voice and the look of her eyes. And as Bob retraced his footsteps he blamed himself bitterly for having made such exceedingly bad use of the opportunity that had been granted him.

CHAPTER VII.

A SUNDAY CALL.

WHETHER a hapless young man be in love or not the world has to go on as usual. He must get up of a morning, eat, drink, and, to a great extent, pursue his usual avocations. The passion which consumes him is sedulously hidden from the vulgar eye, as something too sacred for it to gaze upon. His sufferings are borne heroically and in silence.

A promise made to a lady, even although that lady be not the object of your affections, is entitled to respect. An honourable gentleman feels himself bound to fulfil it, whether his inclinations do or do not approve. Having pledged his word, there is no going back.

This conviction was strong upon Bob's mind when Sunday afternoon arrived. Since meeting Lady De Fochsey in the train she had occupied but a comparatively small share of his thoughts. Nevertheless he remembered his appointment.

Consequently, he dressed himself with extra care, and, after eating a hearty lunch, set out on foot for her ladyship's house, whose locality he had previously ascertained. He had gone to church that morning in the hope of seeing Dot, but Dot for some reason or other was not present, and he felt the sacrifice had been vain, and wondered feverishly when and how he should see her again. If only he could catch a glimpse of the doctor then he might arrange a day for his daughter to go out hunting; but at present the future was shrouded in obscurity. He kept contriving all sorts of plans by which they might meet. Most successful projects in imagination, and yet

ones that when he came to meditate seriously upon putting them into operation seemed to contain some element which might possibly displease Dot, and were therefore promptly discarded. Four whole days had passed since he had seen her. It appeared a miracle how people could live so close to each other, and meet so seldom. And yet he had marched up and down the road in front of the doctor's house at least a dozen times. If this were to go on life would not be worth living.

Altogether, Bob felt thoroughly disheartened. Since his immersion in the brook he had not been well. He could not throw off the chill which he had then caught, and although he refused to take any care of himself, and pooh-poohed the idea of taking any medical advice, a sense of physical discomfort added to the despondency of his mental condition.

But the walk did him good. His way

led through pleasant country lanes, where the thorny bramble still retained a few red and yellow leaves, and where bright clusters of scarlet berries peeped out from the dark hedge-rows. A sharp frost had prevailed the night before. In the shade the grass was still covered by a silvery burden ; but where the wintry sun rested upon it, there the rime had disappeared, leaving behind a faint trace of moisture, which lent freshness to the herbage and appetite to the browsing cattle. As a rule the Stiffshire roads are not celebrated for their cleanliness. The rain that descends lies about in miry puddles, and takes days to percolate through the heavy clay soil. But to-day there was no need to turn up even a trouser hem. They were bleached quite white and hard, except here and there where the sun had chanced to slant down upon them with peculiar force. The air was still and sharp ; the sky faintly blue, fading away to a

misty grey where it touched the horizon. Every now and again as he walked along, the deep lowing of cattle, or the crisp swish of grass torn violently from its roots, broke the silence. Otherwise, scarce a sound was to be heard.

Before long Bob arrived at his destination.

Lady De Fochsey's house was well situated on the summit of a gentle incline. Though by no means large—being, in fact, little more than a hunting box—it commanded a fine panorama. Grass, grass, grass. That was what could be seen from its bay windows, added to three or four dark patches on the sky-line, which represented well-known coverts, half a dozen church steeples, and as many villages; the whole intersected by rows upon rows of fences, some big, some little, but mostly the former, and all crossing and re-crossing each other at a variety of different angles.

A great green chess-board, somewhat irregularly marked out, but whereon all the motley crowd of players enjoyed themselves to the full. A country on which the fox-hunter's eye rested with unqualified admiration and approval, but in which the uninitiated could descry nothing except a series of big, dreary fields, bleak and bare to a degree, and destitute of all beauty, save that of space.

Bob marched up a bijou drive, planted with trees that looked as if they ought to grow, but either couldn't or wouldn't, and rang the bell.

Upon the door being opened he inquired if her ladyship were at home.

Receiving an answer in the affirmative, he was at once shown into a small but luxuriously-furnished drawing-room, literally crowded with feminine knick-knacks and conceits. Books, flowers, music, bulrushes, peacock feathers, Japanese fans,

screens, ornamental photograph stands, china, grotesque monsters, &c., met the eye in every direction. Last, but not least, curled up on a white fur hearth-rug before the fire were two fat, wheezy pugs, with huge blue satin bows tied round their creasy necks, and, without compare, the grotesquest monsters of all.

Altogether, a room in which evidences of female folly and female refinement were curiously blended, producing a mixed impression on the acute observer.

For a few moments Bob stood with his back to the hearth—the pugs occupied the central position, and he could only secure one corner—familiarizing himself with these various details, and trying to determine where the refinement ended and the folly began. But this was a point not easily arrived at, and requiring a much greater critic on art furniture.

In justice to his taste, he did not wholly

approve of all he saw. He had a man's impatience of useless lap-dogs, and pugs in particular, especially be-ribboned pugs ; also of flimsy antimacassars, gimcrack chairs, and little spindle-legged tables, that had the horrid knack of over-turning on the slightest provocation. Good, solid, sensible furniture was what he liked ; not all these three-cornered, new-fangled arrangements, which blocked up a room and made people afraid to move in it. These reflections passed through his mind as he stood awaiting her ladyship's arrival. She was a long time in coming ; and, impelled by curiosity, he took to examining the various photographs so liberally dotted about.

They were nearly all portraits of gentlemen belonging to that class which Dot Lankester would probably have designated as “mashers.” The same vacuous expression of self-content adorned the countenances of them all. Their hair was parted down

the middle, and beautifully brushed ; their coats were tightly buttoned over their manly chests ; a pocket handkerchief invariably protruded—presumably to let the public know that the owner possessed such an article—and in the matter of shirt-fronts, cuffs, studs, sleeve-links, watch-chains, charms, rings, gloves and button-holes, they were simply beyond reproach. As specimens of what careful and elaborate dressing can do, they were “Things of beauty, a joy for ever.” Only not men. At least, so it seemed to Bob. There was an air of effeminacy about these mute reproductions of living objects which made him turn away from them in disgust. He felt an irresistible desire to divest the originals of some of their smoothness and gloss, and meet them in a fair stand-up fight.

Continuing his tour of examination, he came upon a photograph of Lady De Fochsey—the only female one in the room—

which he remarked with some wonderment. She was depicted in full evening costume, extremely *décolletée*, standing beside a marble column, with both hands clasped tragically behind her head, thus boldly calling attention to the seductive curves of her graceful figure.

Bob looked long and critically at this masterpiece of the photographic art, coldly ascertaining the lady's good and bad points, and dissecting each feature with cynical composure. Lady De Fochsey's eyes were fine, her nose small and straight, her mouth passable, a trifle thin-lipped, but otherwise unobjectionable. No doubt, as the world goes, a very pretty woman; and yet although he admitted her beauty, it was a face that possessed no fascination for him. The expression spoilt it. It was artificial, unreal and insincere.

He had just arrived at this conclusion, when a rustling of skirts was heard outside

in the passage. He glanced at the clock. She had kept him waiting exactly twenty minutes. Luckily, time was of no particular importance, else he might have felt more aggrieved than he did. The afternoon had to be whiled away somehow.

At the near approach of their mistress, the pugs began to display a slight animation outside their own immediate circle of interests, represented by the fire and the hearthrug. The youngest and slimmest half rose from her recumbent position ; the eldest condescended to cease snoring, and gave vent to one or two short, snappy barks, that might mean satisfaction, but which certainly sounded more like irritation at the entry of a second intruder.

Lady De Fochsey appeared on the threshold, clad in an exquisite toilette of dark blue velvet, which set off her golden locks, azure eyes, and pink and white complexion to perfection. She had not

lived twenty-eight, nearly twenty-nine, years in the world without learning the art of making the most of herself.

Bob had promised to come early, and he had been even better than his word; in consequence of which, her ladyship, instead of being already seated in state to receive her Sunday afternoon visitors, found herself compelled to struggle into the velvet gown in a desperate hurry and slur over those last delicate touches of rouge, which, when artistically applied, added so greatly to her appearance. Not that the rouge had been omitted, only her cheeks were rather more hectic than usual, and consequently required a subdued light.

But her drawing-room was so arranged that this could easily be obtained.

“A thousand pardons for keeping you waiting such an unconscionable time, Mr. Jarrett,” she exclaimed effusively, holding out both her white bejewelled hands with

a pretty foreign air of apology. “I was just finishing a letter to a soldier cousin of mine, at the Cape, when you were announced, and thought you would be good enough to excuse me for a few minutes. These foreign letters are always rather an undertaking. One has to cram so much news into them, and has to rack one’s brains to find the wherewithal.”

This letter to the soldier cousin was a most gratuitous invention on Lady De Fochsey’s part, but it sounded better than telling the truth, which would have been——

“Ahem! Mr. Jarrett, I’m sorry to have kept you so long, but I had to go upstairs and dress, and my frock was awfully tight and wouldn’t meet, and then, just when we succeeded in fastening it, one of the buttons went crack, and my maid had to hunt for a needle and thread to sew it on again.”

Of course the soldier cousin was infinitely preferable to such a plain unvarnished tale

as that. Women were nowhere if they did not surround themselves with illusion. All admiration—all love was illusion really, only of a pleasant kind.

But if Bob had been annoyed by the delay, he was courtier enough not to show his vexation, and proved quite equal to the occasion. He declared to her ladyship that he would willingly have waited all day, if only to obtain a glimpse of her.

She smiled benevolently at him, pulled down the blinds three or four feet, seated herself with her back to the light, and motioned to him to occupy the vacant place on the sofa by her side. Evidently she was determined to make amends for having detained him so long.

CHAPTER VIII.

DEVELOPING PSYCHIC FORCE.

“THERE! Sit down, do,” she exclaimed coaxingly. “You great tall men seem such a terribly long way off a poor little woman like me that I declare it’s downright hard work having to crane one’s neck up at you. For my part, I never can talk, unless a person be close to me.”

“It assists conversation, certainly,” said Bob. “I shouldn’t think, though, that anybody could have the moral courage to place any great distance between himself and so charming a lady. I know I can’t.” And he plumped down almost on the top of the blue velvet skirt.

“Oh! you sad flatterer,” she murmured

coquettishly. “How am I to believe you?”

“By looking in the glass. Surely you see corroboration of the truth there.”

“Yes, of several rather unpleasant ones,” she thought to herself, but she did not say so aloud.

“And what have you been doing since we last met?” inquired Bob after a slight pause.

“I have gone through a variety of the most wonderful experiences, Mr. Jarrett; I feel as if I had only just begun to live, in the proper and enlightened sense of the word.”

“Indeed! That sounds very mysterious. How did you make so remarkable a discovery?”

“Do you remember my telling you about my friend Mrs. St. John, and the *séance* that was to take place at her house?”

“Yes, perfectly. I have the keenest recollection of it,” answered Bob.

“Well, I spent the most creepy, delightful, and blood-curdling evening I ever spent in my life, and all owing to that dear man, Monsieur Adolphe De Firdusi. Do you know him by any chance?”

“Not I. Who is he?”

“Impossible. You don’t actually mean to say that you have not even heard of him. Well, you *are* behind the times.”

“Very likely. It strikes me one would have to be uncommonly rapid to be before them now-a-days. But with all due respect to your ladyship, you have not yet gratified my curiosity.”

“Adolphe De Firdusi—isn’t it a romantic name? just the sort of name you expect great things of—is the head of the powerful modern school of electrical, esoteric and spiritualistic psychology.”

“Dear me! And what wonders did this

first-class conjuror perform?" ejaculated Bob.

"Elevations into space, even of common objects like a chair or a table," she responded in tones of intense excitement. "Mysterious rapping proceeding from the spirits with whom he holds communication, invisible writing, and many other marvellous manifestations besides. I confess that I went to my friend's house somewhat sceptically inclined, but I came away a complete convert."

"It's awful hard lines upon the poor spirits," said practical Bob.

"In what way, Mr. Jarrett?"

"Why, I fancy that one of the chief ideas of our mortal minds in connection with a future state is represented by repose. We associate the hereafter with rest and freedom from worry. Now, according to your friend Monsieur Adolphe, the unfortunate beings who have departed this

world and gone to another, are little better off than general servants."

"Really, Mr. Jarrett. What extraordinary things you do say."

"Well, but is it not so? These poor spirits are at everybody's beck and call. A little shoebblack, cleaning his shoes in the gutter, displays mediumistic tendencies, and he may summon the celestial form; also the tradesman, also the farmer, also nine people out of ten. To me there is something revolting in the very idea."

"Ah!" sighed her ladyship. "You speak like one who does not understand. As Monsieur Adolphe truly observed the other night, ignorance and dulness of the finer perceptions are our greatest enemies. I wish you could meet him. He would soon alter your opinions."

"I doubt it," said Bob obstinately.

"Oh! yes, indeed he would. No one can resist him. He has cultivated his soul

to such an extent that he is now nothing but a mass of psychic force."

"I'm afraid I'm rather dense, but will you tell me exactly what those words mean? At present they convey nothing definite to my mind."

"Dear! how sad!" exclaimed Lady De Fochsey, clasping her hands theatrically.

"Is it? I look to you to enlighten me."

"Of course, 'psychic force' means ever so many things," she explained somewhat vaguely.

"All right," interposed Bob. "I'll take that for granted."

"And it is simply impossible to go into detail, when one is treating so stupendous a subject," she went on, wishing she could but recall some of Monsieur Adolphe's long words and high sounding phrases. "People must have faith—yes, faith first and foremost, and then it all comes to them in time."

“Again I must ask you to forgive my stupidity, but what comes, Lady De Fochsey.”

“Oh! all sorts of things, as I told you before. It is so difficult to explain, but clairvoyance, and thought-reading, and—and spiritual interchanges with the souls of those who are dead.”

“Very jolly if you met your dearest friend, but quite the reverse if some horrible wretch you were only too glad to get rid of kept always cropping up,” said Bob. “Did you receive any messages from Monsieur Ad—— I mean from the spirits.”

“Yes, several.”

“And what sort of messages were they?”

“Delightful ones. Hoped I was well, and looked forward to seeing me. One poor man I used to be very fond of in the olden days sent me quite a long letter; and, oh! so beautifully worded.”

“It is curious that the language should be the same,” remarked Bob. “Do the spirits ever make any mistakes in orthography?”

“How can you ask such a question? It’s really quite shameful. I’ll not tell you anything more if you talk like that.”

“Oh! yes, do. I want to hear all about Monsieur Adolphe; I am an unbeliever now, I admit, but if any one can convert me, I feel sure you can.” And, whether by accident or design, Bob’s hand came in contact with Lady De Fochsey’s, and she did not withdraw hers immediately.

“Ah!” she said, “I wish I were good at explaining things, but I’m not, although perhaps I may get to be a more worthy disciple by degrees, for Monsieur Adolphe says that if only I cultivate my powers assiduously, and run up to town occasionally for the purpose of receiving his advice, in time I——”

All of a sudden she stopped short, and fixed her eyes rapturously upon Bob, with the air of one who has just made a great and exceedingly important discovery.

“What is the matter?” he asked, feeling rather uncomfortable at being stared at so pointedly.

“Just fancy!” she exclaimed ecstatically.
“You are—yes, you really are——”

“I am—I really am—what?”

“A medium, my dear boy. Oh! you *lucky, lucky* young man, let me congratulate you.” And in her rapture her golden head almost sank upon his shoulder, only, as one side of her fringe felt a little loose, she had to be careful, and he profited by the opportunity to edge a few inches farther away.

“Bah!” he exclaimed contemptuously, but not politely.

“Oh! it’s no use saying ‘Bah!’” she rejoined. “The fact remains, and you

can't help yourself. You possess strong magnetic powers. I can tell by your eyes, though I don't know yet whether you'll develop into a medium of the first or only the second order. That depends chiefly upon yourself."

"In that case I shan't develop into either."

"But you must. The process is unconscious, and it may so happen that your individual will has not much to do with it, especially if you come under the influence of a—of a—" but as she could not find the exact word, she broke off short, and said softly—"Oh! Mr. Jarrett, I am so glad, so very, very glad. This was precisely what I wanted."

"What are *you* glad about?" he asked somewhat roughly, beginning to wonder if she had gone off her head altogether.

"You don't quite understand at present but I'll try and make it all clear to you.

Monsieur Adolphe explained to me most particularly the system by which the magnetic current is transmitted. It is enough, he says, for two people who both possess spiritual aptitudes to meet once or twice a week, and sit for a couple of hours at a time holding hands, and looking steadily into one another's eyes, for them insensibly to gain power."

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Bob.
"What next, I wonder?"

"But the curious part is this," resumed her ladyship, with a pensive smile. "It seems that the process is greatly assisted, and the cultivation of internal force immensely facilitated, when the two mediums are of opposite sexes. For instance—a man and a woman will arrive at much speedier results than a woman and a woman, or a man and a man."

"Yes, I can understand that," said Bob, with blunt sarcasm.

"Ah! you are beginning to comprehend at last," she rejoined, in satisfied tones. "I thought you would before long. These things just require a little explanation at first starting, but they are not as difficult as they seem, between two people who are really sympathetic."

"That's comforting, at any rate."

"Very, is it not? And now, Mr. Jarrett, what do you say? Will you try?"

"Try what, Lady De Fochsey? You speak in conundrums."

"Firstly, to develop your higher nature and kill the baser."

"Is that all? And pray, how am I to set about it?"

"I'll show you. You have only to do as I tell you."

So saying she jumped up from the sofa, dragged the cover off a small rosewood table that stood in the window, lifted it on

to the hearthrug, and then proceeded to place two cane chairs one on either side of it. Bob watched these operations with amazement.

“Now sit down,” she said impatiently.

He did as he was told, too much mystified to venture on an observation.

“That’s right, Mr. Jarrett. Give me your two hands.”

“Won’t one do?”

“No, I must have both.”

He held them out obediently, feeling somewhat like a captive.

“Now take mine in yours—so, and press them firmly.”

At this request Bob revived. He lost no time in complying with it. Indeed, he began to consider the situation great fun. They were quite close to each other, their knees almost touched, and only the small table separated them.

But her ladyship was not satisfied yet.

“Look straight into my eyes,” she said, with preternatural gravity, “and after a time tell me what you see.”

“There’s no occasion to wait. I see a very pretty woman,” replied Bob audaciously.

“Hush! You must not speak yet. It is too soon.”

“How long am I to keep quiet? I never bargained for having to play mum-chance.”

“You must judge by your own feelings; probably about a quarter of an hour.”

“Very well,” replied Bob. “But before we begin this game in earnest—for I presume it is a game—may I venture to make a suggestion?”

“Yes, if you are quick about it, but don’t be long, for the conditions are favourable, and it’s a thousand pities not to profit by them.”

“From what I gather,” said Bob gravely

"our present object is to strengthen and transmit the magnetic force which we—or rather you—believe we both possess. Now at this moment there is but one point of contact between us. The electric current passes through our hands, and our hands alone. Don't you think—I make this suggestion with all due diffidence—that if you were to put out your pretty little feet and I were to put out mine, the effect might be enormously intensified? We should then secure a negative and a positive pole."

She sighed gently.

"Yes, Mr. Jarrett, per—perhaps you are right."

"I'm sure of it," said Bob confidently.

"And now to business," she said. "Keep on pressing my hands and looking into my eyes, and if, by the end of a quarter of an hour, you begin to feel peculiar sensations, swear to describe them,

as I swear to describe mine. Only don't be disappointed if we fail to produce any active manifestations to-day, since it is absolutely necessary first to establish harmonious relations."

Bob laughed heartily.

"All right," he said. "Your orders shall be obeyed."

And then, for fifteen whole minutes neither of them spoke a word.

The clock on the mantelpiece ticked away industriously, and those two abominable pugs snored on louder than ever.

Now, to have free leave given you to press a pretty woman's hand, and a woman moreover, not disinclined for flirtation, is a permission of which most men would take liberal advantage. To do Bob justice he was by no means backward in doing so. But squeezing hands surreptitiously and from impulse, and squeezing hands by command, are two very different things, as

before long he began to discover. For when you are enjoined to continue the pressure at all hazards, then the temptation, and, *sub rosa*, sense of enjoyment, vanishes, until in the end you become only conscious of an irksome effort. If any gentleman doubts this fact, let him try the experiment for himself.

For the first five minutes Bob's fancy was amazingly tickled. He discovered that the lid of one of Lady De Fochsey's eyes drooped more than the other, that the rims beneath them were not natural, and that the eyes themselves, when critically examined, were wholly wanting in expression. But the next five minutes, he began to feel rather bored, and suffered from an irresistible desire to yawn, which desire, however, he could not gratify, being unable to withdraw his hand. The last found him growling and grumbling inwardly, and voting the whole thing "a

most deuced bore." He made a mental vow, never to squeeze a woman's hand as long as he lived. The nerves of his arm had grown quite dead. At length, to his infinite relief, the quarter struck.

"Well!" murmured Lady De Fochsey, who appeared in a dreamy and semi-hypnotic state. "How do you feel?"

"Oh! awfully jolly," responded Bob, not wholly veraciously, but thankful to be allowed the use of his tongue again. "How do you?"

"Strange—very strange. I have indescribable sensations. Do you see anything?"

"Rather," he answered, his sense of the ridiculous assuming the upper hand.

"Oh! what? Tell me what."

"I see"—and he lowered his voice to a mysterious key—"visions of fair disembodied women, floating about in spirit space. Waves of ether surround them.

They are free from every coarse and earthly element——”

“Yes, yes, go on,” she interrupted. “This is really wonderful, especially at the first attempt. It proves that you possess most special gifts.”

“One gracious form beckons me to draw near,” continued Bob, still more dramatically. “She whispers that she has waited long, so long for my coming.”

“Just like me,” sighed her ladyship.

“Yes, just like you. She says that our communications require strengthening—that I am too far off. Ha! she bids me, with ethereal condescension, encircle her diaphanous and well-nigh invisible waist, with my grossly mortal arm.” Here Bob proceeded to clasp Lady De Fochsey’s tightly-laced one, the lady offering no resistance. How could she? When he was a medium, and was producing such lovely manifestations.

"My kindred spirit," she murmured, "my kindred spirit, at last — at last." Then, abandoning herself completely to the ecstasy of the moment, she added deliriously, "Is that all?"

"Oh! dear no. Would you believe it, my spiritual adviser actually commands me to press my mundane lips to her chaste ones. She does not even recoil from the thought of possible contamination, but offers me a draught of purest nectar."

To what length Bob's audacity and irrepressible spirit of mischief would have led him it is impossible to say. Suffice it, that his arm was still round her ladyship's waist and her head was within suspicious proximity to his own, when suddenly the door flew open, and Lord Littelbrane was announced. The aspirants after psychic force started apart.

No further manifestations could be expected to take place in the presence of

a third, and probably uncongenial, party. Lady De Fochsey gave a little startled scream, and alas! alas! the powerful electric current which had been so successfully established between herself and Mr. Jarrett was rudely broken.

But that it had been established was conclusively proved by the shock felt on either side at its unexpected and inopportune rupture.

None but male and female mediums could possibly have arrived at such sterling results in so short a space of time.

If the height of clairvoyance had been reached in one single *séance*, what might not be hoped for at the next meeting?

To the earnest believer in psychology, delightful and never-ending fields of research were open. Guided and impelled by the glorious spirit, the body might take care of itself. That vile earthly thing was of no account.

CHAPTER IX.

AN UNTIMELY INTERRUPTION.

IT took a good deal to disturb Lady De Fochsey's self-possession ; but for a few seconds after the announcement of Lord Littelbrane she was fairly staggered.

Her mind had been filled with all kinds of rare and transcendental ideas. It was uplifted and exalted in quite an uncommon degree. Her spirit was just ready to soar amongst astral planes and undertake a celestial voyage of discovery, and now, all of a sudden, she was called upon to attune herself to things terrestrial. It was like being bound by some horrid chain that rudely pulled you back to earth. Her discomfiture was increased, too, by the fact

that, amongst the whole circle of her acquaintance, his lordship was the very last person whose presence she expected. No thought of him had entered her head ; for, although she had already spent two whole hunting seasons in Stiffshire, he had never once condescended to call, or to set foot inside her house ; and this in spite of sundry friendly little invitations issued by her in the beginning.

Beyond a few stereotyped remarks out hunting, confined almost exclusively to the weather and the sport, no civilities had been exchanged between them. After a time her innate sense had told her that this was a man on whom feminine fascinations and blandishments would produce but little effect. It was wiser to reserve them for a more sensitive and emotional individual.

So she had almost given up the attempt of trying to enrol his lordship amongst the list of her admirers, and contented herself

with being on speaking terms—nothing more.

Consequently she was now at a loss to understand to what the honour of this visit was due. Her brain was too distraught to divine any possible motive.

But if, for once in her life, Lady De Fochsey felt slightly disconcerted, Lord Littelbrane was a hundred thousand times more so. His notions about ladies and their behaviour were strict, not to say old-fashioned, and he had seen enough to shock him very considerably. There could be no two opinions as to the familiarity of the positions in which the parties had been surprised. If he could have withdrawn without saying a word, most assuredly he would have done so. But it was too late now to effect an escape ; therefore, after an awkward pause, he advanced a little way into the room, and turning very red in the face, said,

"I beg pardon. I fear I am intruding."

At these words Lady De Fochsey called all her forces into action. She felt that the moment was critical—that, in fact, her whole character might depend upon it. A very pretty story could doubtless be trumped up at her expense, and circulated all over the hunting-field. In some way or other she must account for the entire business, and in a manner, moreover, that would completely remove his lordship's displeasure. The task was by no means easy. There were a good many facts against her, but she did not despair. Her babyish blue eyes, and innocent pout, and childish speeches which professed no harm in anything had stood her in very good stead before now. Besides, in spite of his stiffness and reserve, she did not believe Lord Littelbrane to be either a very strong or a very acute man. She thought that it

might not prove altogether difficult to throw dust in his eyes.

Therefore she held out her hand almost affectionately, and said with great apparent unconcern :

“Intruding? Oh! dear no. How could you possibly imagine such a thing, my lord? Mr. Jarrett and I were merely trying to repeat some spiritualistic experiments which I saw the other night, and which required a certain juxtaposition of the electrical forces.”

She was very good at long words. She picked them up like a parrot, and introduced them regardless of their meaning. But they sounded well—learned, scientific and so on; and, to tell the truth, his lordship was a little impressed.

“Oh! indeed,” he responded. “And are these experiments confined exclusively to yourself and this—” he was going to say gentleman, but checked himself and

substituted “young man,” without, however, deigning to look at Bob.

She smiled up into his face with the frankness of a child.

“Of course not. We were longing for a third person to assist our efforts. Will you join us?” and she smiled even more sweetly than before.

He was mollified, but not sufficiently so to accept the invitation.

“No, thank you. I am afraid your experiments are not much in my line.”

She looked at him oddly, wickedly, alluringly.

“Oh! how cruel. Won’t you even try?”

“Thanks; I think not. At all events,” lovering his voice, “not in the present company.”

“Ah, I understand. But,” shrugging her shoulders, “it was simply a case of *faute de mieux*.”

“I am glad to hear it. I feared it might be otherwise.”

“What ! with your experience ?” Then she rested her hand on his coat-sleeve, and said in a louder key, “Dear Lord Littelbrane, you must really let me initiate you into some of the mysteries of the higher life. I do not profess to be an adept, but we might try and cultivate our souls together. I feel sure there is sympathy between us.”

The last remnants of his ill-humour vanished. He felt infinitely flattered and raised in his own esteem. Only he could not unbend as long as that “duffer”—that nephew of Straightem’s remained in the room. He wondered why on earth the fellow did not go ; and although he was not going to demean himself by talking *to* him, he might talk *at* him, and convey a pretty broad hint as to the desirability of his prompt departure.

“I think so also,” he said, addressing Lady De Fochsey pointedly, “but sympathy requires a *tête-à-tête*. Don’t you agree with me?”

“Ah! yes, of course. Do you hear that, Mr. Jarrett?”

Bob marvelled inwardly at her impudence—“brass,” he dubbed it mentally. But he had no desire to stay any longer and be scowled at by Lord Littelbrane, so he took up his hat, and, moving towards Lady De Fochsey, said abruptly :

“Good-bye. I must be going.”

“Must you really?” she asked, in accents which seemed to say, “Quite right. I think you had much better, for you have had your innings, and now should make room for another.” Then, turning to Lord Littelbrane, she said :

“Excuse me one moment, my lord.”

He bowed stiffly in response. Up till now he had resolutely abstained from taking

the slightest notice of Bob, and desired to avoid an introduction, so he turned his back upon him and walked to the window, and stood gazing vacantly out at the green fields and browsing sheep.

Meantime Lady De Fochsey accompanied Bob to the door.

“Was there ever such an untimely interruption?” she whispered confidentially. “I declare I could have boxed his lordship’s ears.”

“Hush! he will hear you.”

“I don’t care if he does. He has spoilt our afternoon.”

Bob could not help feeling rather disgusted with her hypocrisy. He was convinced in his own mind that no sooner did he leave the house than she would make up to Lord Littlebrane, precisely as she had made up to him.

“His coming was awkward, certainly,” he admitted. “And I feel sorry on your

account, as I fear you were placed in a rather disagreeable situation, and partly through my instrumentality."

"Oh! never mind about me, I'll soon smooth old 'Stick-in-the-mud' over. But, I say, Mr. Jarrett—Bob—I must call you Bob, Mr. Jarrett sounds so formal."

"Well, what is it, Lady De Fochsey?"

"You will keep our manifestations strictly secret, won't you? It would not be wise to mention them to an ignorant and unsympathetic public."

"Of course not," said Bob, repudiating the idea of recounting his folly. "You may trust me to hold my tongue, especially where so many universal truths are concerned."

"That's right. I knew I could depend on you; and, Bob—when will you come again?"

She might have been a girl of eighteen, proud in the possession of her first lover

and confident of her powers of attraction ; but her eagerness repulsed him. It wanted the charm of extreme youth.

“ I really can’t say,” he rejoined coldly. “ It depends entirely on what’s going on.”

“ Come soon, there’s a dear creature. We ought to join hands again in three or four days’ time at latest, else the magnetic current may evaporate.”

“ Perhaps it would be just as well to let it, all things considered.”

“ Nonsense. You must not talk like that. To-day’s sitting has conclusively proved that we are indispensable to one another. You can only rise through my instrumentality, and I through yours. We have each a mission to perform, which should render us superior to personal feeling.”

“ And what will be the end of it all ? ” he inquired with languid interest.

“ End ? Why, in course of time we may be able to raise the chairs and tables from

their places and suspend them in mid-air. We may get to hold an ordinary pencil in our hands, and find long spirit-messages written upon a slate ; we may even see the forms of the departed hovering about our heads and whispering divine words of love and comfort. Surely you cannot entertain any doubts after the results we have obtained to-day ? They were so absolutely conclusive."

" I don't know. They seemed to me to be purely mundane results at best. If they contained any divine element, the spirits must be very naughty people."

" That is because you have a mundane mind. We both have at present ; but by degrees we shall grow out of all that, and disencumber ourselves of every earthly attribute."

" I doubt it," said Bob, sceptically. " Earthly attributes have a nasty way of sticking."

And with that he effected his escape, and did not breathe freely until once more he found himself outside in the open air, inhaling the clear frosty atmosphere, instead of the languorous flower-laden perfumes of Lady De Fochsey's drawing-room.

"Phew!" he exclaimed, with a quick outward breath, as if to shake off every reminiscence of his visit, "was there ever such a pack of nonsense? Really, it makes one wonder what next women will be up to now-a-days. Every new craze, no matter how foolish, finds converts amongst the fair sex."

Then he walked on a step or two, and added, with a growing sense of self-dis-satisfaction :

"I wonder what the deuce Dot would say if she knew what an infernal fool I've been making of myself. I shouldn't like her to hear how I've spent my Sunday afternoon."

Meanwhile Lady De Fochsey applied herself to the entertainment of her remaining guest. He had felt annoyed by her prolonged conference with Bob, and she found him looking very cross and consequential, like a bird whose feathers have been ruffled the wrong way.

“Ten thousand pardons,” she exclaimed in her prettiest and most penitent manner. “That young man promises to develop into a dreadful bore. He has fastened himself upon me, and really I hardly know how to get rid of him.”

This was an entirely new aspect of affairs, and one infinitely more pleasing to Lord Littelbrane.

If what she stated was true, and she was being persecuted by an impudent stranger, he was more or less bound to step in and protect her from further inconvenience.

“You are much too good-natured,” he

said, “ and should not allow yourself to be imposed upon.”

She sighed, and drooped her eyes in a timid, feminine fashion that she knew how to assume on occasions.

“ Ah ! Lord Littelbrane, your advice is excellent, no doubt ; but what is a poor single woman in my position to do ? She does not like to be downright rude, and yet on the other hand she is more or less at the mercy of every man she comes across.”

“ How did you first get to know this Mr. Jarrett ? ” he asked, seating himself in the place recently occupied by Bob.

“ I met him out hunting. You remember the day he tumbled into the brook ? ”

“ Do you mean to say that he had the impertinence to speak to you ? ”

“ I dropped my hunting crop and he opened a gate for me. I was obliged to say thank you ! ”

“ And on the strength of that the fellow has actually had the cheek to come and call. Well ! I never.”

She did not contradict him, and left his lordship under the impression that Bob had forced his acquaintance upon her. It was a little mean, perhaps, not to tell the truth, but it saved an infinity of trouble ; and really, if one were to try and stick up for all one’s friends in their absence life would become a perfect burden. To be nice to them when they were present was the extent of what she could undertake.

“ And what about this spiritualistic business ? ” inquired Lord Littelbrane suspiciously. “ Did your friend Jarrett start the idea ? ”

“ Well, no, not exactly. I proposed it at first in fun, and because I did not know what on earth to do with him. And then as you might have seen—but really I hardly like to tell you.”

And she turned her head away coyly, and gazed pensively at one little slippers foot.

“ Yes, yes, go on,” entreated her companion, whose curiosity was thoroughly aroused.

“ Well, then, the young man grew shockingly familiar. I was just going to ring the bell and bid the servant show him out, when you came in. You may imagine my feelings of relief.”

This was a very strange story, concocted on the spur of the moment, but stranger still, Lord Littelbrane believed it. From that instant he saw before him a beautiful and injured woman, whose natural modesty had been grossly outraged.

“ Next time I meet the brute I’ll punch his head,” he exclaimed vindictively, knowing, however, that he would do no such thing, except by deputy.

“ Oh ! No, indeed, my lord, you must

not be so fierce. Mr. Jarrett misconducted himself a little certainly, but then you see he is a medium, and mediums are always entitled to a certain licence."

"H'm! And pray how do you get to be a medium?"

"In a great many different ways."

"Do you think you could make me one? I shculd rather like to acquire a few privileges in your case."

"I don't know. I've never had the chance of ascertaining whether I could or whether I couldn't."

"Will you try, Lady De Fochsey?"

He spoke so gravely that she suspected some serious intention.

"With pleasure, my lord, provided you really wish it."

CHAPTER X.

LADY DE FOCHISEY CHOOSES BETWEEN HER
WORLDLY AND SPIRITUAL LOVERS.

LORD LITTLEBRANE had come there that day charged with a desperate purpose, and bent on fulfilling a design which he had only formed after long self-communing and inward cogitation. The presence of Mr. Jarrett—the pose in which he had discovered him—had shaken his intention, but not wholly destroyed it. An explanation had, however, been forthcoming, which he considered satisfactory. The lady was to be pitied, not blamed, as in his haste he had imagined. A dear, pretty, little good-natured thing, who required some one stronger than herself to guide

and direct her through the shoals of life. A woman who was sweet and guileless as an infant, a very child in nature, and whose faults proceeded entirely from too kindly and unworldly a disposition.

This was how he summed her up, after half an hour's conversation and after some fifty or sixty eye-glances, lip-pouts, shoulder-shrugs, and hand-touches. It takes quite an ordinary Delilah to defeat a Sampson, and Lord Littelbrane was no pillar of strength. The very seclusion in which he had lived, his reluctance to mix freely with the sex, rendered him all the more credulous and unsuspicious. Taking a wife was very much the same as taking an awkward fence out hunting. He did not like the necessity. It put him in an awful fright; still, once it became patent that the thing must be done, it was wiser to go through with a good grace.

And now he found his courage rising.

She was so very sweet and gracious—nay, almost caressing.

He cleared his throat, and, with a preparatory cough, said :

“ Ahem ! Lady De Fochsey, I wish to consult you on a delicate matter, but before doing so will you grant me a favour ? ”

“ Why, most certainly,” she answered, surprised by the solemnity of his manner.

“ Thank you. I thought you would. Will you give me your views on matrimony ? ”

“ On matrimony ! ” she echoed, fairly astonished at the demand.

“ Yes, I should like to hear your ideas, if you have no objection to stating them.”

“ Do you mean my own personal experiences, Lord Littelbrane, or the opinions that I have formed in a general way ? ”

“ I should like both, but the former for choice. What I want to arrive at is this :

Do you, or do you not, approve of marriage, looking at it not emotionally, but merely as a philosopher?"

"What a peculiar question. Of course I hold with matrimony as an institution. Women would fare even worse than they do without it."

"Have you fully considered the responsibilities connected with the state?"

"To what responsibilities do you refer, my lord?"

"At the present moment, chiefly to those incurred by parents towards their offspring."

"Oh! I don't pretend to have any experience in such matters," she said lightly. "You see I was lucky enough to avoid bringing a tribe of children into the world."

"You never had any? Not even one?"

"No, never, I am thankful to say."

"Excuse me, Lady De Fochsey, but

were you not disappointed at failing to perpetuate the family name?"

She burst out laughing. This cross-examination appeared to her so utterly absurd, and it had not yet dawned upon her what he was driving at.

"Really, Lord Littelbrane," she said, still striving to control her mirth, "I did not consider the family name of so much importance as all that, and it would have driven Sir Jonathan simply mad to have had a squalling baby in the house."

"Strange," he murmured, eyeing her critically from top to toe. "Any one would have said that you were formed by nature to be the mother of a healthy and numerous family."

She was not over and above pleased at the turn the conversation was taking. She told herself it was coarse—very coarse. As a charming woman she had no objection

to being admired, but not as a peopler of the world.

“ Does your ladyship enjoy good health ? ” he went on, not noticing her displeasure, and still pursuing his own train of reflections with a stolid perseverance that was one of the chief attributes of his character.

“ Yes, very, thank goodness. I’ve never been ill in my life. But why this sudden interest ? ”

“ Young, strong, handsome, and the owner of an admirable constitution,” he exclaimed, as if speaking his thoughts aloud. “ Where can I find a more suitable mate, or one more likely to furnish me with an heir ? Age, looks, temper—every-thing is right.”

“ Good gracious ! Lord Littelbrane. What on earth are you talking about ? ”

“ The time has come for an explanation, Lady De Fochsey.” And as he spoke, he

rose from his seat and began pacing restlessly up and down the room. “It is important that I should marry and obtain a successor, otherwise the family title and estates pass into unknown hands.”

“What a misfortune,” she exclaimed with an irrepressible touch of satire.

“Of all the ladies of my acquaintance,” he went on boldly, warming to his subject at last, “you are the one whom I consider most fitted to assist in procuring the desired result. I am a plain-spoken man and like coming to the point at once. My age is forty six, and I have twelve thousand a year. Will you be Lady Littelbrane?”

So saying he stopped short, and looked hard at her ladyship with his small colourless eyes.

For the second time that day she experienced a genuine movement of surprise. Lord Littelbrane’s proposal, however flattering it might be to her vanity, was totally

unexpected. He had not paved the way for it in the least. Moreover, this brusque style of courtship did not recommend itself to her ideas. They—as we already know—were high-flown and romantic.

Besides on this particular afternoon her soul was still steeped in the vague and exquisite rapture produced by the recent *séance*. Mystic influences intoxicated it. If he had appealed to the more lofty and spiritual side of her nature, he might have had a chance; but there was something revolting and grossly material in the notion of being invited to marry a man for the express purpose of furnishing him with a son and heir. Added to this, she had no natural love of children. The sight of a baby did not throw her into tender rhapsodies. On the contrary, the little ugly, puckered, red-faced things only inspired her with aversion. All the affection she had to spare was already

concentrated upon her darling pugs. In short, Lord Littelbrane's proposal could not possibly have been couched in more infelicitous terms. The very words "children and parental responsibilities" made her shiver. And then, he was so abominably grave. His face would have reflected credit upon an undertaker, and won him golden opinions as a hired mourner at a funeral. She dearly loved a man with a little dash and "go" about him, even if he *did* require keeping in his place every now and again. During the whole time of Mr. Jarrett's visit she had never once felt dull. But, on the other hand, Lord Littelbrane was a wealthy nobleman, and occupied a fine position. If she married him she would be able to snub all those people who had shown her the cold shoulder during her widowhood. To do so would afford infinite satisfaction. No doubt he offered many advantages from a worldly point of

view. Even spiritual exaltation could not entirely shut her eyes to that fact. And then she looked at him. Looked critically and dispassionately at his little, undersized figure ; his bloodless face, with its covering of wizened-up skin ; his sandy hair, and weak, watery eyes. He was very insignificant ; in fact, downright ugly. The sort of man she disliked. Nevertheless, one short hour ago she might have taken him, and put up with his personal appearance ; but at the present moment her whole being vibrated in response to the ecstatic conviction that she was deeply, desperately in love, and at last had fallen victim to the long-sought and vainly-courted passion of which she had read so much in novels, and seen so little in real life.

Already she felt like a heroine of romance. Bob's brown eyes and bright glances had penetrated her impressionable heart, and henceforth she told herself that

she could never, never wed any but a medium in search of the eternal verities.

How rapturous and yet how lofty had been the sensations conjured up by that too brief *séance*. And now she was requested to sacrifice all these grand, heroic feelings—feelings which seemed to lift her into an altogether purer atmosphere—in order to bring a young Littelbrane into the world.

Faugh ! The vulgarity and the gross materialism of the proposition clashed with all her finer instincts, and even rendered her impervious to her own self-interest. The excitation of her mood was such that it repudiated the commonplace idea of getting married and having children. She rose from her seat, smoothed down the front of her dress (a habit of hers), and said :

“ My lord, you do me great honour ; nevertheless I cannot become Lady Littelbrane.”

He was too utterly amazed to be offended. Such a reply had never entered into his calculations.

“Why not?” he asked incredulously.
“Have you any reason for saying no?”

A mischievous smile played round the corners of her mouth.

“Because it is just possible I might disappoint your expectations.”

He looked at her, much as he would have looked at some thoroughbred mare.

“I am inclined to think not, Lady De Fochsey.”

“Well, whether I should or whether I shouldn’t, I am afraid to run the risk.”

“There need be none as far as you are concerned.”

“What?” she exclaimed satirically.
“Not when Napoleon the Great offers the honour of an alliance? Pshaw! my lord I know what men are too well to believe you.”

He was rather flattered at being compared with so famous a man. He smiled.

“I do not think you quite realise what you are refusing,” he said with quiet confidence.

She made no immediate reply. Indeed, she began to think that, arrogant as they sounded, there might be some truth in his words. She had got a little nearer earth again in the last few minutes, and the extreme assurance of his manner impressed her more than she cared to admit.

“Perhaps not. It is just possible you may be right there,” she said uneasily.

“However,” he continued, taking up his hat and stick, “I shall not look upon your decision as final. No doubt my proposal has come upon you as a surprise. Think it over. In a month’s time I shall ask you again to be my wife, and expect then to receive a different answer.”

And with this curious speech he departed, feeling very much more intent on gaining Lady De Fochsey's consent than when he had first entered the house.

Opposition lent a zest to the pursuit which had hitherto been wanting.

He was not in the least downcast, as many men similarly situated might have been. He possessed far too good an opinion of himself to believe for one moment that the lady of his choice was in earnest. His mind could not realize any woman refusing him seriously.

Being somewhat unprepared for so great an act of condescension on his part, it was quite natural that she should require a little time to get accustomed to it. This was how he construed her rejection of his suit.

As for himself—well—he did not profess to be a very ardent wooer. He was marrying from principle, and from principle

alone. That was why, unlike the rest of mankind, he could look round calmly, and select a partner according to his theories of selection and maternal aptitude. But under these circumstances he was not in a hurry. He felt none of the passionate impetuosity of youth, and had no objection to wait until her ladyship had become thoroughly familiarized with the greatness and importance of her mission in life.

Of her ultimate acquiescence, he entertained no doubts whatever.

When Lord Littlebrane had gone, Lady De Fochsey sat for a long while lost in meditation. By this time her mood was no longer so exalted as it had been immediately after Robert Jarrett's departure. The phantasies of her brain were growing dimmer and vaguer.

Already an inward voice whispered uneasily that she had done a foolish thing in refusing Lord Littelbrane.

“What has a woman of your age got to do with love?” the tormentor kept on saying. “Are you not past all that folly?”

The thought made her feel quite hysterical. It was such a cruel, cruel question to emanate from one's own secret consciousness, that it set her off laughing and crying by turns.

The pugs were disturbed in their slumbers, and barked in melancholy chorus.

Thank goodness! to these dear, discreet confidantes she could confess the tumultuous passions that tore her heart in twain. Throwing herself full length on the hearth-rug she embraced them fervently, almost as if they, too, had been mediums, and cried aloud :

“Oh! Doodie, Oh! Snoodie, my sweet darlings! Pity your poor mistress, for she is most dreadfully in love, and has actually

refused a coronet and twelve thousand a year. My pretty ones, what do you say to that?"

Doodie and Snoodie curled their tails, blinked their eyes, and licked their black shiny lips as much as to say :

" We think our ' poor mistress ' has taken leave of her senses altogether ; but it don't much matter to us, as long as she will retain them sufficiently to keep up a good fire. As for love—it's all nonsense. Comfort's the thing to go in for. Food, warmth, drink, then sentiment can be dispensed with."

Unfortunately Lady De Fochsey was unable to obtain a clear insight into the sagacious minds of Doodie and Snoodie. If she had, she might have seen that materialism there reigned supreme. No gracious spirit-forms of departed pugs affected the serenity of the living.

But their mistress, as she lay with them

clasped in her arms, kept on wondering what further delicious manifestations might have taken place if only Lord Littelbrane had not appeared when he did.

Her mind was a disordered chaos, in which worldly and spiritual lovers were grotesquely jumbled up, now one, now the other gaining a short-lived preponderance. Still, she had had so many of the former that on the whole she preferred the latter. A spiritual embrace was not only very exciting, but also delightfully novel. Exhausted sensation took a fresh lease of life when brought into communion with psychological converts. Spirit - wooing was so refined, so chaste, so exquisitely chivalrous.

There was nothing the least prosaic about it—not like Lord Littelbrane's love-making. His mode of courtship had been laconic and commonplace to a degree.

CHAPTER XI.

THE DIVINITY'S MOTHER.

As Bob walked in the direction of home his thoughts, curiously enough, did not dwell much on the events that had taken place during his visit to Lady De Fochsey. They rebounded from her ladyship to Dot Lankester. It was strange how all the higher longings within him, instead of responding to the advances of his spiritual affinity, were attracted in an entirely different direction. He was disgusted with the part he had more or less been forced to play, and felt as if he had behaved traitorously towards his real love.

Four whole days had now elapsed since he had seen her. He began to fear she

must be ill, and wondered, although the hour was somewhat advanced, whether he could not concoct some excuse for calling at Doctor Lankester's house, and perhaps obtaining a peep of his daughter.

Thus thinking, he quickened his stride, and walked steadily on, until within about half a mile of the village. Then, all of a sudden, as he turned a sharp bend in the road, he saw no less a person than the doctor himself immediately ahead.

This was indeed a piece of good luck, for even if he failed to catch a glimpse of Dot, he was sure to hear some news of her, and learn the reason why, in spite of all his endeavours, they had not met.

He soon overtook his neighbour, who was walking at a leisurely pace, like one enjoying the Sabbath repose, and who expressed his pleasure at their meeting.

“ How do you do, Mr. Jarrett? ” he said, shaking hands cordially. “ I see that, like

me, you have been tempted by the beauty of the afternoon to take a constitutional."

"Yes," replied Bob, "I thought a walk would do me good; but I confess to having had an object. I have been calling on Lady De Fochsey. Do you know her by any chance?"

"No, we have never met, except in the hunting field, where I have seen her occasionally, but not often. She is not one of our regular residents."

"Oh! indeed. And when do you hunt again, doctor?" inquired Bob, thinking a good opportunity had presented itself to attack the subject of Dot's accepting a mount.

"I'm not quite sure. It's very difficult for me to form plans beforehand. They are so liable to be upset at the last moment. But if I can possibly manage it I hope to get out on Wednesday."

"Let me see, where do they meet?"

said Bob. “ My memory is so bad that I have forgotten.”

“ At Pilkington Hill-side, in the very best part of the whole country. That's why I'm anxious to keep the day clear if I can. We generally have a good run from there. The Pilkington foxes are nearly always a wild, straight-running lot.”

And Doctor Lankester's mild face lit up with the enthusiasm of a genuine sportsman.

“ Does —does Miss Lankester accompany you ? ” inquired Bob, a trifle confusedly.

“ I hope so. She has been away from home the last few days, staying with a friend the other side of the county.”

“ Oh ! ” said Bob, trying to appear indifferent. “ I thought I had not seen her about.”

“ That was the reason ; but the child comes back on Tuesday, and I should like to arrange a treat for her if I could. You

don't know what an awfully keen sports-woman Dot is, Mr. Jarrett."

"I can quite imagine it, if she takes after her father," said Bob with a smile.

"Well, I suppose these things are hereditary," admitted Doctor Lankester. "At all events, Dot inherits her love of sport from me, for her mother does not know a horse from a cow. However, the child is a true chip of the old block, and it is a pleasure to see her out hunting. She enjoys herself so thoroughly. The only thing is it makes me wish I could afford to mount her decently."

Doctor Lankester had altogether dropped his professional manner, and apparently enjoyed nothing better than talking about his daughter, of whom he was evidently as proud as he was fond.

Now was Bob's chance; he could not possibly have had a better.

"I—I wanted to ask you something," he said, blushing like a schoolgirl.

"Indeed! What is it? If I can be of any assistance to you, I shall be only too glad."

"It's a favour," said Bob, turning a shade more crimson than before.

"I'm delighted to hear it, because, in that case, the probabilities are the request is something I am in a position to grant."

"Thank you, awfully, doctor; I only want you to say yes."

His companion smiled. Bob's simplicity was a refreshing contrast to Captain Straightem's hauteur.

"You forget," he said indulgently, "that I still remain in ignorance as to your wishes."

"Well, the fact is," Bob blurted out in reply, "I have a great many more horses in my stables than I can possibly ride——"

"Then you're a very lucky man," interrupted the doctor playfully.

"Yes, but if you would only allow Do—I mean Miss Lankester, to take one whenever she wants to go hunting, it would be conferring a downright obligation upon me. There, that's what I wanted to say."

Doctor Lankester gave no immediate reply. Coming from an almost total stranger he was touched by the kindness of the offer. In twenty years Captain Straightem had never made a similar one.

"Well, what do you think of my idea?" asked Bob anxiously. "You won't refuse, will you?"

"Upon my word, Mr. Jarrett, I hardly know. It is awfully kind of you to suggest such a thing, but I scarcely feel justified in allowing Dot to profit by your generosity."

"It would be uncommonly nice to give her a real good mount for Wednesday,"

urged Bob persuasively, “especially if she knew nothing at all about it till she got to the meet.”

Dr. Lankester’s countenance showed that the proposition was one which recommended itself.

He was devotedly attached to his daughter, and the mere thought of giving her pleasure proved a great inducement to accept Mr. Jarrett’s offer.

“I think Dot would go off her head with delight,” he said. “*How* she would ride if she were really well mounted. I should like you to see her follow hounds just for once, Mr. Jarrett.” And his face beamed with paternal pride.

“I hope to see Miss Lankester follow hounds not once, but many times,” Bob rejoined; “and, as I said before, it will be an act of charity to keep my horses in work.”

“There are not many ladies in these

parts who can beat Dot across a country," went on the doctor, feeling that he had secured a sympathetic listener, and in his innocence never once suspecting Bob might have an ulterior motive. "Although I say it—who shouldn't—she *can* ride. I know no prettier sight in this world than to see Dot coming over a fence."

"She's a pretty sight anywhere," said Bob, under his breath. Then he added aloud, and in tones of perfect satisfaction, "Come, that's settled, and we need not discuss the matter any more. How do you go to covert, doctor?"

"We generally ride, provided the distance is not too great."

"In that case, if you and Miss Lankester will jog out to the meet on Wednesday, Kingfisher shall be there in readiness, and my groom can then change the saddles."

"A thousand thanks. That will suit us capitally, and I do hope, for Dot's sake, we

may have a good run, if only to give her a chance of proving herself not wholly unworthy of your kindness."

"Pray don't talk about kindness," said Bob, colouring up to the roots of his hair. "The boot is on the other leg, really."

"Ah? that's your nice way of putting it."

"Not at all. I can't tell you, doctor," and Bob's face grew suddenly grave, "how lonely I am all by myself in that great big house. I long for companionship, and if you and your family would only treat me as a friend, instead of as a stranger, you would be conferring a real benefit."

Doctor Lankester was moved by this appeal. He had conceived a great liking for the simple and straightforward young fellow, and only Bob's superior social position had prevented him from showing it more fully. Now his heart was completely won.

“ We shall all appreciate having a neighbour in you,” he said heartily. “ And if we are to treat you unceremoniously, you must treat us the same, and, whenever you are dull or out of spirits, consider our house your home. And, as a beginning, you had better come in now and drink tea with my wife, who will thoroughly enjoy a chat. For here we are,” pulling up before the identical porch beneath which Bob had stood gazing at Dot’s pure profile only a few nights previously.

The young man gladly accepted this invitation. He had nothing whatever to do until dinner-time; and, in spite of Dot’s absence, his curiosity prompted him to take the present opportunity of seeing her home and surroundings. They would surely speak to him of her in some form or other.

He also believed that if he could but succeed in establishing a friendship between

himself and Doctor and Mrs. Lankester, it would materially assist his cause hereafter. There was nothing like having the parents on one's side to start with. Their goodwill might prove an enormous gain, and greatly facilitate all future meetings.

Mothers were proverbially kind to eligible young men who appeared to fancy their daughters, and Bob entertained every hope of enlisting Mrs. Lankester's sympathies. A quiet half-hour's confidential conversation would at least afford a chance of making a favourable impression, which he should take care to increase later on.

So he followed the doctor into a small but cheerful and cleanly-papered passage, and shortly afterwards was ushered into the presence of Dot's mother. He had looked upon her with reverence, as a being to be admired and distantly adored, in virtue of her quite too charming daughter. And she disappointed him.

Had he not been so young and so foolish he might have known that such would surely prove the case. For when does a middle-aged woman ever come up to a man's expectations? He can always find a flaw in her somewhere, if so disposed. His imagination had pictured a gentle, fragile, ethereal-looking old lady, with silvery locks, and a white Shetland shawl, and a sweet musical voice. In reality, he saw a stout, rotundly-shaped personage, with black beady eyes, rosy cheeks, and several chins, who spoke in a sharp staccato voice, and who, against his will, impressed him with an idea of vulgarity, and of belonging to a lower class than did her husband.

Mrs. Lankester was clad in a black silk dress, very shiny at the shoulder-blades. Her head was covered by a gorgeous erection of lace and bright blue ribbons, and round her fat red neck hung a long gold watch-chain. The first glimpse proclaimed

her fondness for meretricious adornment. At least, so Bob decided. As for any resemblance to Dot—well, when she began to speak, it relieved him to find that there was none. They had not a single trait or feature in common. All the girl's refinement and gentility evidently came from her father. She owed none of her charms to the maternal side.

Mrs. Lankester received him most graciously ; nevertheless, there was something about her which he did not like, though he wculd have been at a loss to define what that something was. Her exaggerated civility produced an irritating effect upon his nerves, and seemed too great to be real. There was too much fussiness in her manner and in her effusive speeches. He preferred Doctor Lankester's homely method of offering hospitality. But that good man remained singularly quiet in the presence of his better half, of whom it

was easy to see he stood in considerable awe. He soon left the room, pleading as an excuse that he had some business to attend to, and the lady was not ill-pleased to find herself alone with her guest. The doctor always would prose on so about medicine and science, and things that nobody cared a bit about. She should extract far more from Mr. Jarrett in his absence.

Meanwhile the tea had been brought up, and she pretended to be very busy among the cups and saucers.

“Sugar?” she inquired presently, with an ingratiating smile, holding up a lump between the tongs, and thrusting it almost under her visitor’s nose.

“If you please, Mrs. Lankester.”

“*And cream?*” laying an emphasis on the words, which called attention to the fact of cream and not milk being offered.

"If it is not troubling you too much," said Bob amiably.

"Oh! don't mention the trouble; it's a pleasure."

Seated *vis-à-vis* his hostess and furnished with a cup of boiling tea, which could only be drunk in spasmodic sips, and which was far more painful to the palate than comforting, Bob now, for the first time, summoned up sufficient courage to inquire after Dot.

"And so your daughter is away from home, Mrs. Lankester?" he said.

"Yes, she left early on Wednesday morning. In fact, the day after she and her father dined with you."

"Don't you miss her most dreadfully? I'm sure I should if I had such a child," said Bob, his imagination running riot.

"Oh! yes, of course," responded Mrs. Lankester, in tones which gave the lie direct to the assertion.

"But then, you see, Mr. Jarrett, we poor

mothers of families have got to get used to losing our offspring."

"Do you mean that they take husbands unto themselves?"

"Exactly. You've hit the right nail on the head."

"And is Miss Dot going to get married?" he asked with considerable perturbation.

"Now, now, how you do jump at conclusions, to be sure! I never implied such a thing; I merely meant to say that I suppose she will some day, when the right man turns up."

"And hasn't he turned up yet?"

"Not in my opinion. Bits of boys without a halfpenny to bless themselves with are no good whatever, and the mistake is encouraging them, as I have impressed upon Dot since her childhood."

CHAPTER XII.

MATERNAL TROUBLES.

Bob gave a sigh of relief at this announcement. He felt as if some deadly weight had been removed from his heart.

“She’s sure to marry pretty soon,” he said decidedly.

“She may or she may not,” answered Mrs. Lankester, looking at him with her sharp black eyes. “I don’t mind telling you that my eldest daughter made a very bad match indeed, thanks to her father’s weakness in giving his consent; and I’ve no intention of allowing Dot to do the same, that is to say—” drawing herself up consequentially, “if *I* have any voice in the matter.”

“Quite right,” said Bob, highly approv-

ing of this decision, since he saw that it shut the doors to numbers of penniless candidates.

“ You see, Mr. Jarrett,” continued Mrs. Lankester in her most confidential manner, “ poor Matilda was simply sacrificed. She fell in love with a young engineer who had only a hundred and fifty a year, and Doctor Lankester, instead of sending him to the right about, actually encouraged the marriage. With what result? There is poor dear Matilda now, at five-and-twenty, living in some frightful, unhealthy African village, from which she may never live to return, and with three little bits of children on her hands. Can you conceive of anything more dreadful or more trying to my maternal feelings? ”

“ But perhaps she is happy, Mrs. Lankester. If so she would make light of enduring a few hardships for the sake of being with her husband.”

"Oh! don't talk to me of her husband. Every time I hear his name mentioned it makes me mad to think what a fool Doctor Lankester was, not to send him off with a flea in his ear. But I shall take pretty good care not to let Dot throw herself away in a similar manner, however much she may be backed up by her father."

And as she spoke Mrs. Lankester's countenance assumed such an obstinate expression that Bob immediately caught himself pitying her more unworldly and tender-hearted spouse, and wondering how many Caudle lectures he had already been treated to on the subject of Matilda's *mésalliance*. But he kept his speculations secret, and said soothingly :

"I think you have no cause for alarm as regards Miss Lankester. She is sure to make a good marriage, possibly a brilliant one. But perhaps you are too ambitious."

"Oh! dear no, Mr. Jarrett. You are

quite mistaken there. I would let her marry anybody who had a sufficient income."

"And what do you call a sufficient income, Mrs. Lankester? Fifteen thousand a year?"

That was precisely the amount he had inherited from his uncle.

"Two would satisfy me. But there—" breaking off short, "what's the use of talking? Young men with money and on the look out for a wife are scarce in this part of the world: and even a few hundreds are not to be picked up in a hurry."

"I thought there were any number of hunting bachelors in Stiffshire," said Bob.

"So there are. But they don't count, though lots of them are aggravatingly rich."

"Indeed! Why not?"

"Because their heads are stuffed full of

nothing but horses and hounds, and they think far more of a yearling filly than they do of a young lady. I begin to despair of Dot's finding a husband down here." And Mrs. Lankester sighed audibly.

"She must have one, of course?" said Bob, with a touch of satire lost upon his listener, whose extreme worldliness repelled him, although he could not help feeling amused by it.

"Of course. What is a young woman to do if she remains single? She's a perfect nobody, and has no position whatever. Besides, Dr. Lankester can't afford to leave either of his daughters a fortune, He's not at all a rich man, and of late years he has been far from strong."

"Never fear," said Bob confidently. "Miss Dot can do quite well without a 'dot'—no joke intended."

"Ah! that's all very fine, but seriously, Mr. Jarrett, what disturbs me so much

now-a-days is the tribe of women one meets with wherever one goes. There are a great many more in existence than there are men, and things have got to such a pass in our country, that the fact of the matter is there are not enough husbands to go round. Some of the girls are bound to get left out in the cold, whether they like it or not."

"Then I should ship them off to Australia," said Bob, laughing heartily. "A batch of nice, rosy English young ladies would be immensely appreciated out in the bush."

"One can't send a girl off to a foreign country all alone," said Mrs. Lankester, receiving the suggestion quite seriously. "Besides, Dot is so young yet, that I think she should be allowed to have a chance first, though Heaven only knows how she is ever to meet anybody worth marrying down here."

Mrs. Lankester's anxiety to get rid of her daughter, and the way in which she appealed to him, tickled Bob's fancy not a little. A lady of greater refinement would have concealed her object better, and treated the whole matter more artistically. Instinct told him that in his love's mother he should find a powerful ally, who would advance his cause by every means at her disposal. And, though he might not much like the woman, this was of vast importance. It was an immense relief, too, to ascertain that practically the field lay open, and that none other had laid siege to Dot's affections.

Consequently, the more piteously Mrs. Lankester bewailed the scarcity of eligible suitors, the lighter hearted he grew. Everything appeared satisfactory, as far as he was concerned.

"You mark my words," he said gaily, "some stranger will come pouncing down

on Miss Dot when you least expect it, and carry her off before you have time to recover from your surprise."

"I hope so at any rate. But are you really in earnest, Mr. Jarrett?" looking at him with eyes which seemed to pierce his innermost thoughts.

"Yes, quite. Your daughter is much too charming to remain a spinster, even in this country, where there is such a sad insufficiency of the masculine creature."

"And you are not joking?" she said pointedly. "You really mean what you say?"

"Of course I do; I never was more serious in my life."

"Why, Mr. Jarrett," she exclaimed playfully, "I shall begin to think you are a little bit 'gone' on Dot yourself." And an unctuous smile spread slowly over all her roseate countenance.

It was a hazardous speech, but there was a look in his face which emboldened her to make it, and made her heart beat fast with a hope that surpassed even her highest ambition.

He blushed furiously, but did not attempt to deny the insinuation.

Suddenly she leant forward and said with almost motherly solicitude :

“I hope we shall see you very often, Mr. Jarrett, although we have no fine house, or good cook, or old wines to offer as an inducement.”

“I don’t care two straws about such things,” he said hastily.

“No? Well, then, I shall no longer feel afraid to make you heartily welcome whenever you like to come. Even a pot-luck dinner we could manage, if you are not particular.”

“There never was anyone less so. You seem to forget, Mrs. Lankester, that I was

not born in the purple, and have only lately inherited my fortune."

"It's a relief to find you have not inherited Captain Straightem's manners as well as his money," said the lady vindictively. "I can't abide those stuck-up, supercilious people."

"I hope you don't think me 'stuck-up'?" said Bob.

"Not a bit. That's why I like you."

"I am glad your first impressions have been favourable, Mrs. Lankester."

"La ! Mr. Jarrett, I feel as if we were quite intimate already, and can almost imagine I had known you all my life. I should no more have dreamt of telling your uncle about Matilda's marriage, and my hopes for Dot, than of flying. But you are what I call a real neighbour, not a make-believe."

"I hope to prove myself one," he said.

"You have done that already ; but if

you wish to do so still more, you might take compassion on that poor girl of mine, every now and again when you have no better employment. She leads a dull life at best, and a little *young society* would do her all the good in the world."

He understood perfectly what she intended to convey by this petition. Her vulgarity was intense, but fortunately her wishes coincided with his own, so that he felt no difficulty in complying with the request.

Only he could not help thinking that it was very disgusting of a woman to throw her daughter at a man's head quite so plainly, simply because she knew he was well-off. For of his real character Mrs. Lankester could know positively nothing. She might have been sacrificing her offspring at the shrine of a monster, for aught she was aware.

Had he been in Dot's place he should

have resented such conduct fiercely, and he fancied now that he could divine the reason of her coldness and reserve. No doubt the mother's many lectures on matrimony had revolted her pride, and caused her to assume that sternly defensive demeanour which in his heart of hearts he both admired and respected.

He told himself that he should not have liked her so well if, instead of exhibiting the same simple, child-like nature as her father, she had taken after Mrs. Lankester.

That lady inspired him with an antipathy which he was at a loss wholly to account for. Her amiability struck him as unreal, her good humour as forced.

But he was extremely ungrateful to harbour such thoughts, whilst she sat there, smiling at him across the table and confiding all her maternal troubles, as if he had been her bosom friend and on terms of the greatest intimacy.

When at length he arose to take his leave, he was conscious that she had somehow contrived to establish a kind of secret understanding, the purport of which was much to this effect :

“ You admire my daughter ; you can’t hide that fact from me, try what you will. Very well. Don’t be afraid. The girl has arrived at a marriageable age, and it is high time she was settled in a home of her own, and off my hands. You can make up to her as much as ever you like. I shall take care that you have every opportunity given you.”

Bob naturally enough was delighted with his visit, though not perhaps equally so with his future mamma-in-law. He foresaw that the probabilities were he should like her better before than after matrimony, and caught himself wondering how she might be prevented from paying too frequent visits at the Court.

No sooner had he left the room than Mrs. Lankester popped her head out of the door and called in a sharp excited voice :

“ Dr. Lankester. Come here, I want you ! ”

“ Yes, Emma, what is it ? ” he enquired, emerging from his laboratory in shirt sleeves and slippers.

“ That young man is in love with Dot. You mark my words.”

“ What young man ? ” he enquired mildly, having forgotten the very existence of his late visitor.

“ What young man ? Why ! Mr. Jarrett of course, and I tell you he’s awfully spooney already.”

“ Nonsense, Emma. You women are always taking ridiculous ideas into your heads.”

“ Oh ! indeed ! *I* take ridiculous ideas into my head, do *I* ? *I*, who am the only

one who has a grain of sense in this house. Thank you, Doctor Lankester, thank you."

"Pshaw!" he muttered impatiently, threatening to withdraw. "Can't a poor young fellow even set foot inside our doors without your having designs upon him?" And he commenced a retreat.

"Don't go. I've something to say to you," his better-half exclaimed authoritatively.

"You generally have, my dear," he responded with a sigh of resignation.

"Yes, but this is something very special --something that may affect your daughter's future welfare, and secure her fortunes hereafter.

"Out with it, then. Every woman should make a point of checking all tendency towards verbosity. The sex have a natural inclination to use half-a-dozen words where one would do."

"How rude you are! But about Mr. Jarrett——"

"Well, what of him? Has he been doing or saying anything very startling?"

"You know what a terrible muddle you made in poor Matilda's case——" unheeding the demand.

"That's according to one's individual way of thinking. Matilda may not be rich, but she's very happy, and money is not everything in this world."

"It's a great deal, though. And supposing Matilda's husband were to die to-morrow, where would she be? Should not you have to keep her and the three children?" looking at him contemptuously.

This interrogation was so unanswerable that Doctor Lankester took refuge in silence. He generally said as little as possible when the partner of his bosom began an argument, knowing from bitter

experience that otherwise it was apt to prove interminable.

"All I want is this," continued Mrs. Lankester. "You've had your own way with one daughter, and failed signally, let me have mine with Dot."

"I don't understand you. And God knows I don't want to have my own way in anything that is not for the child's good."

"You are very dense. Leave me to manage Mr. Jarrett, and don't attempt to interfere."

"But, Emma——"

"No, let us have no buts. You are not called upon to volunteer confessions, even if there were any to make. All I ask you to do is to hold your tongue."

"I fear there may be some deception," he said, yielding a reluctant consent.

"Deception, indeed! And pray what do you take me for, Doctor Lankester?

That is a pretty word for a man to use to his own wife. It's as good as telling her that she's a downright liar."

"Emma, I do wish you would not use that word. It's unladylike in the extreme."

"Story-teller, then, though it's too absurd to be so particular, when you have just told me to my face that I am capable of playing all sorts of mean tricks."

"I'm sure I never said anything of the sort," said the poor doctor apologetically.

"You insinuated it, John. Yes, and in the most unkind and brutal fashion. And all because I asked you to maintain a discreet reserve where your own daughter is concerned. It really does not signify to me who Dot marries, not a bit; but don't lay the blame at my door if she ends by being a pauper, and has not even so much as a roof over her head after your death."

And so saying Mrs. Lankester flounced out of the room, leaving her husband in a state of mild bewilderment as to what the discussion really meant, and for what particular reason he was sternly forbidden to allude to certain innocent facts in Mr. Jarrett's presence.



CHAPTER XIII.

THE MORBEY ANSTEAD MEET IN THEIR CRACK COUNTRY.

A LARGE and fashionable host assembled at Pilkington Hill-side to greet the Morbey Anstead hounds in their crack country. Every town and village within a radius of twenty miles had apparently poured forth its contingent. Many arrived by train, but more reached the fixture on smart, galloping hacks, whose fore-legs seemed warranted to resist the trying influences of Macadam. About quarter of a mile from the covert was a road where each fresh arrival congregated, and this road was literally crowded with horsemen, grooms, spectators and vehicles of every description, from a smart four-in-hand containing a batch of

officers from the neighbouring town of Stiffton, to a diminutive, yellow-painted donkey cart, the owners of which were standing up on the wheels in order to obtain a more elevated point of view.

Huntsmen and hounds were evidently the chief attraction to the natives. Burnett was surrounded by a bevy of meanly-clad, good-natured foot-people, who watched his proceedings, and those of his canine tribe with intensest interest, and uttered remarks amusing from the very ignorance they displayed. Altogether the scene was a brilliant one, rendered gay to the eye by the numbers of scarlet coats and snowy leathers, which offered a pleasing contrast to their back-ground of grey-green grass and neutral-coloured hedge-rows, that stretched far away towards the horizon. A few gleams of sunshine would have rendered it still more imposing, and given warmth to the surrounding landscape; but

the day was dull and still, with a quiet grey sky, and just a bite of frost in the air.

What wind there was came from the east. Though not strong it was cold in quality, and made the horses round their backs and whisk their tails in a manner not wholly agreeable to nervous riders. The Field were in a particularly cheerful and sanguine mood. Even the Mutual Adorationites were a shade less sad than usual, and not *quite* so chary of speech. By a remarkable coincidence, everybody had apparently made up his or her mind that the day was one destined to prove productive of a good run. Even Burnett seemed hopeful, and declared there was every appearance of its being a scenting morning, which statement still further increased the expectations of his followers.

Bob had taken care to arrive early. He sported "pink" for the first time, and felt

very fine in his new clothes. Already he wondered at himself for ever having descended to elastic straps. Looking back, even Charles' ill-concealed derision appeared perfectly justifiable. His thoughts, however, were full of Dot, and he was glad not to differ from his neighbours for her sake. He would not have liked her to consider him a guy. He left home quite a quarter of an hour sooner than was necessary, because he did not desire to miss the pleasure of seeing her face when first she became aware of the fact that she was to ride Kingfisher instead of Mouse.

Consequently, he took up his station at the junction of four roads a little way removed from the crowd, whilst his pulses throbbed with feverish expectation. Meantime Kingfisher was safely domiciled in some farm buildings close at hand.

Fortunately for the impatient young man he had not to wait long.

Before many minutes had gone by, he recognised a certain sturdy dun cob, advancing at a brisk trot, and bearing on her back a slender, feminine figure which set his heart a-beating even whilst yet a considerable distance off.

Doctor Lankester accompanied his daughter. He was mounted on a short-legged, compact, flea-bitten grey mare, with a big body, strong quarters, and a lean head and neck, which gave her a real business-like and “varmint” appearance. In fact she looked a hunter all over; and the way she pricked her ears at sight of the hounds, champed at her bit, and quickened her stride, proclaimed a decided preference for chasing the fox rather than jogging soberly along the roads from one patient to another. Her rider appeared transformed. From a quiet, rather melancholy individual, he had changed into a vivacious and enthusiastic sportsman, who

sat his horse like a centaur, and whose heart was evidently in the work.

“Hooray ! Here you are !” exclaimed Bob, colouring with pleasure, and raising his hat to Dot. “How do you do, Miss Lankester ? Has your father been telling you as you came along of the terrible plans we have hatched in your absence ?”

The tone of his voice reassured her.

“No,” she said smiling. “What plans ?”

The fresh air and the sharp exercise had tinted her face like a wild rose.

“I will leave Doctor Lankester to explain ; for if you don’t approve of our conspiracy, you will forgive him more readily than me.”

She turned towards her father with a look of bewilderment in her clear eyes.

“Papa,” she said. “What does Mr. Jarrett mean ?”

“Well, Dot,” he replied, “the fact is, our kind friend and neighbour has insisted

upon your accepting a mount for the day. So jump off old Mouse, my girl, and we will set about changing saddles at once."

A sudden flush of pleasure rushed to her cheeks, and dyed them a vivid crimson. Bob would not have lost the sight of that involuntary expression of delight for a great deal. It sent an answering thrill of rapture running through his veins, and was all the reward he wanted. No words could have conveyed half so much.

And Dot, taken completely by surprise, did not give herself time to think. Besides, if her father had sanctioned the proceedings, it was absurd for her to entertain any scruples. Red letter days were scarce. Surely she would be a fool not to profit by one when she got the chance.

Some such thoughts flashed for a moment through her brain, and she exclaimed cordially :

" A mount for me? Oh! Mr. Jarrett,

how good of you. I feel as if it were impossible to thank you enough."

But Bob had vanished. Without waiting to hear what Dot would say he had gone off in search of Kingfisher. He reappeared however, very shortly, accompanied by a groom leading the proud animal destined to carry Miss Lankester.

She jumped lightly to the ground without further delay, and stood holding Mouse's bridle with her small, gloved hands, whilst her saddle was being transferred from the one horse to the other.

A little, slender bit of a thing she looked ; not exactly short, but very slight and girlish, and with a wonderful pair of clear, intelligent eyes, through which her whole nature seemed to shine.

So Bob thought as he gazed at her, but Dot's attention was fully engrossed by Kingfisher.

The chestnut was a real beauty, and a

thorough gentleman in appearance—long, low, and symmetrical, with a blood-like head, small sensitive ears, and a neck strong, yet pliant as a piece of whalebone. He stood about fifteen-three, on good sound limbs, short from the knee downwards, whilst his sloping shoulders denoted speed and comfort to the rider, his great, long muscular thighs and well let down hocks, immense jumping capability. Dot was quite sufficiently well versed in horse-flesh to take in her hunter's good points. As for Doctor Lankester, who like all Yorkshire men was a heaven-born judge, he stood and looked him over with the eye of a “connoisseur,” and even then found it hard to detect a fault.

“That's something like a hunter,” he exclaimed approvingly. “Clean bred, yet up to weight, and as nearly perfect in shape, as man could wish for. Dot,” turning to his daughter with a pleased expres-

sion, “it will be your fault, my girl, if you do not show a good many of us the way to-day.”

Dot gave a little, silvery laugh, which rang out musically on the still air.

“I’ll do my best at any rate, father. But it takes a very first-rate performer to flourish his heels in Sugarloaf’s face.”

“Aye, aye, that’s so,” said the doctor, playing with his mare’s fine mouth. “But all the same, if I’m not very much mistaken, you’ll have the legs of me to-day.”

When all was in readiness, Bob, after first apologizing for his inexperience, offered to mount the girl, but her father’s hands were already clasped, and she put her foot inside them with the confidence of long use. In another second she was firmly seated in the saddle, and gently taking up the reins, leant forwards and patted Kingfisher’s glossy neck.

“Nice old man,” she said in cooing

accents. “ You and I must soon make friends.”

As she moved off towards where the hounds were located, her slight figure, with its shapely shoulders and small, round waist sitting firm and erect, although it yielded gracefully to every movement of her horse, Bob thought, that in spite of the patched habit, and its threadbare seams, which again had attracted his notice, he had never seen a much prettier sight in his life. She was so trim and neat, and her sweet little face peeped out from under the brim of her pot hat like some bright, fresh, wholesome flower, that held its head up straight, and knew none of the sin and misery that goes on in this vale of tears.

He gave a few final directions to his groom about taking Mouse back to her own stables, and was just about to follow Doctor Lankester and his daughter, when a voice close behind said unceremoniously :

“ Hulloa ! Bob. How are you ? ”

Startled by the familiarity of the greeting, he looked round and perceived Lady De Fochsey, who in her scarlet coat and white waistcoat, reminded him somewhat of a monkey on a barrel-organ.

“ Good-morning,” he responded politely, trying to smother a slight feeling of annoyance at her presence, and the off-hand mode of address, which distinctly intimated that she looked upon him as her own peculiar property. “ Nice day this for hunting.”

“ Yes, very, though I shouldn’t wonder if it rained later on. By the way, would you mind piloting me? I always like knowing I have some one to rely upon, and really, Captain Springerton has taken to jumping such tremendous places, that I told him only the last time he was out, it was really impossible for me to follow him any longer.”

This request placed Bob in a dilemma. He had never bargained for having to take charge of her ladyship in the field, and was rather alarmed by the proposition. To begin with, he had not the very faintest notion whether she went well to hounds or not ; and moreover, on this particular day, he had promised himself the pleasure of keeping near Dot Lankester, and of seeing how Kingfisher carried his precious burden. Instinct told him, that if he acceded to his spiritual affinity's demand, it would seriously interfere with this programme. She was not a lady to brook any rival.

“Upon my word,” he answered diplomatically, “I should be only too glad to assist you in any difficulty, but I am not an experienced sportsman, and really don’t pretend to know enough about hunting to undertake the delicate task of piloting a lady across country.”

“Oh ! never mind that, Bob, you’re too

modest by half. Besides, there's no occasion to go so desperately hard. Indeed I'd rather not as far as I am concerned. These tremendous big fences only scratch your face, and pull all your clothes to pieces."

"It don't much signify about my face being scratched," he rejoined ungraciously, "though of course a lady's is different. Only if hounds run, one is bound to try and be with them."

"Oh ! if one turns up at the checks it does just as well. For my part, I prefer sticking to the roads—they give you so much better opportunities."

He made a wry face, but had not courage enough to ask, to what sort of opportunities she referred, though in his own mind he summed them up by a single word—flirtation.

"I give you fair warning," he said, striving to conceal his impatience at being

separated from Dot, "that I am not a fit person to pilot a lady."

"But, Bob—I want to talk to you. I *must* talk to you, in fact."

"What about, Lady De Fochsey? Can't you say what you've got to say now?"

"Impossible! How can you ask such a question, especially after all that happened the other day? Is there no more magnetic sympathy between us? Has it entirely evaporated?"

"I'm sure I don't know," he responded sheepishly. "I never exactly understood what magnetic sympathy meant."

"You seemed to have a pretty good inkling of it last Sunday afternoon at any rate, but it appears to me that you have retrogressed since then."

"Yes, I am afraid I have. I am not conscious of much improvement."

"Have you made no progress whatever, Bob?"

"It seems not. At least according to your way of thinking."

"Alas! Neither have I, and it proves to me conclusively, that the latent possibilities within us cannot be developed singly, but require mutual assistance. We must repeat our experiments, and lose no time in doing so, else what powers we already possess will fade away, owing to the weakening of the electric current. Tell me, Bob," sidling up close to him, "when may I expect you! I shall take care this time, that our *séance* is not interrupted, just when we are obtaining important results."

He felt more and more embarrassed. Her eagerness was difficult to deal with.

"Really," he said, in shuffling tones that were most unusual to him, and wishing to goodness he had the moral courage to put an end to this tomfoolery once and for all, "it's almost impossible to fix any exact time."

"Are you so very, very busy?" she asked sarcastically.

He reddened. The tone of her voice brought home an uncomfortable sense of evasion.

"Well, yes, I am. The fact is, Lady De Fochsey," setting his jaw as if he were going at some impenetrable bull-finck, "I can't cultivate my 'latent possibilities' until my terrestrial affairs have been placed in some order."

"But why not combine the two? The development of your psychic force would enable you to attend to mere mundane business with far greater ability."

"I fear that it cannot be done. I am not so sanguine as you."

She turned a pair of reproachful blue eyes full upon him.

"Oh, Bob," dropping her voice almost to a whisper, "you are dreadfully unkind.

I could not have believed that you would have treated me like this."

"Like what?" The rose, whose fragrance he had not been strong enough to withstand, was beginning to show thorns.

"You seem to ignore my sufferings altogether."

"We will hope that they are not very terrible," he said, trying to banter her out of her sentimental mood.

"But they are ; and oh ! Bob, we should not have needed many more *séances*. Half-a-dozen or so would soon have rendered us independent of hand-joining. It is only the preliminary stages that are perhaps a little tedious, and when people are born mediums like yourself, they have certain obligations towards their fellow-creatures which it is downright wicked to ignore."

And she looked at him tearfully, for she had not foreseen this refractory spirit.

The distressed expression of her coun-

tenance produced the intended effect. Bob relented somewhat.

"Well, well," he said temporizingly, "there's time enough yet. We will wait till a frost comes, and then see what can be done in the way of spiritual and magnetic improvement."

She was going to make some reply, but at this precise moment, Lord Littelbrane, not seeing Bob, rode up to her side, and the young man profited by the opportunity to effect an immediate escape. He at once cantered off in pursuit of the Lankesters, who had joined the hounds.

Two minutes afterwards his lordship gave the signal for the proceedings of the day to commence, and, accompanied by a whole crowd of foot-people, Burnett moved off at the head of a huge procession, and trotted briskly across half-a-dozen grass fields which separated the covert from the road.

Kingfisher had not been out hunting

since his late accident, and consequently was very fresh. When the good horse saw his old friends, the little beautiful, white and tan ladies in front of him, and felt the soft, elastic turf under his hoofs, he whinnied with delight, and in the exuberance of his spirits, bounded high into the air.

“ You are not frightened, are you ? ” said Bob, a little anxiously to Dot Lankester.

Her whole face was aglow with pleasure.

“ Frightened ? Oh ! dear no. I like it. You’ve no idea, Mr. Jarrett, what an exhilarating sensation it is to feel a good hunter under one when you’ve only been accustomed to inferior animals. I don’t think I ever was on such a horse,” caressing Kingfisher’s silky mane, an action which provoked another playful buck, and a little ringing laugh from Dot.

"I never thought he'd play the fool like this," said Bob resentfully.

"He's only light-hearted, Mr. Jarrett, and so am I," she called out gaily in reply.

Seeing her so cool and undisturbed both in seat and in nerve, Bob began to feel reassured, especially as Doctor Lankester made as light of Kingfisher's vagaries as did his daughter, and evidently entertained no fears on her behalf.

So Bob concluded that his alarm was groundless. Nevertheless he stuck to Dot's side until the covert was reached and a general halt proclaimed. Having mounted the girl he persuaded himself easily enough into the belief that it was more or less his duty to look after her.

END OF VOL. II.

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